

Kyrgyzstan

КЫРГЫЗСТАН

Kyrgyzstan is a nation defined by its topography. Like some kind of Central Asian Shangri-La, the soaring peaks and rugged ranges of this small country form both barriers and borders. And like James Hilton's mythical landscape, once entered it can be difficult to leave.

The Kyrgyz themselves probably thought as much when they arrived some 400 years ago. To a nomadic people from Siberia, the cool mountains and glorious pastures must have seemed like the perfect place to fatten their animals while securing the high ground against invaders. Despite 21st century encroachment the Kyrgyz maintain a semi-nomadic existence, as shepherd families move from village to *jailoos* (summer pastures) with the coming of summer.

While Kyrgyz shepherds cling to their centuries-old way of life, their urban cousins are forging a new direction for the country. Periodic revolutions notwithstanding, Kyrgyzstan has built a foundation of solid democratic institutions and is oft-cited as the freest republic in Central Asia.

The market economy has been allowed to run its course and tourism has emerged as an important income generator. Communities across the country have established 'tourism co-ops', making independent travel simple. After conquering a mountain range or two, go for some R&R on the tranquil shores of Lake Issyk-Köl, or haggle for a handmade felt rug. Adrenalin junkies can scale 7000m peaks, trek over glaciers, ski in winter or kayak in summer.

Despite its small size Kyrgyzstan offers a tremendous variety of travel opportunities and is regarded as a priority destination for Central Asia explorers. Once you've had your fill of deserts and domes, get back to your nomadic roots and see what this small but spectacular republic has to offer.

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 = 46.53som, €1 = 58.31
- **Off the map** Kyzyl-Oi, Inylchek Glacier, Achik Tash
- **Phrases** *salam* (hello); *rahmat* (thank you); *jaqshi* (good)
- **Population** 5.2 million (2008 estimate)



HOW MUCH?

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.50
- **100km bus ride** US\$2.50
- **One-minute phone call to the US** US\$0.25
- **Internet per hour** US\$0.80
- **Kyrgyz hat** US\$3-6
- **1L of petrol** US\$0.80
- **1L of bottled water** US\$0.35
- **Bottle of beer** US\$0.80-1.20
- **Shashlyk** US\$1.20-2

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Horse treks** (p364) A chance to see the Kyrgyz countryside at its best, with rides high into the mountains and across summer pastures.
- **Lake Issyk-Köl** (p315) Hemmed in by mountains, this bizarrely un-freezable lake is the country's premier attraction.
- **Alтын Arashan** (p326) Breathtaking scenery, steaming hot pools and the first glimpse of the secret Ala-Köl lake make for great trekking.
- **Osh** (p356) 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** (p352) The world's largest walnut forest on a network of blossoming woodland treks.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Spend a day in Bishkek (p298), wandering its parks, museums and booming markets then go trekking in the Ala-Archa Valley (p311).
- **One week** After Bishkek head east to Karakol (p320) 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 (p335), a horse trek to Song-Köl (p339) and a visit to Tash Rabat caravanserai (p346).
- **One month** Conquer the above mentioned areas then head west via either Kyzyl-Oi or Kazarman to Arslanbob (p352) and/or Lake Sary-Chelek (p351). Finally, push south to Osh (p356) and spend a day or two exploring this quintessential Central

Asian city. From Osh head overland and out of the country to China, Tajikistan or Uzbekistan.

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.

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, p499, for more details.

HISTORY**Early Civilizations**

The earliest recorded 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 (see the boxed text, p41).

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 (now Burana, east of Bishkek; see p314). Another major Karakhanid centre was at