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Kyrgyzstan

Briefing

Land of the Celestial Mountains

Produced by:

- The Celestial Mountains Tour Company
- The Silk Road Lodge
- The Celestial Mountains Guesthouse (Naryn)

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List of Abbreviations

B&B – Bed & Breakfast
CACSA – Central Asian Crafts Support Association
CBT – Community Based Tourism
Gov't – Government
KCBTA – Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association
KMBA – Kyrgyz Mountain Biking Association
SDC – Swiss Cooperation Office

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Introduction

This Briefing paper is designed to provide background information for journalists and tour operators who are interested in exploring the potential that the Kyrgyz Republic has to offer as a tourist destination. It has been compiled by the Celestial Mountains Tour Company. A CD Information Pack is available from the company – with more information.



Kyrgyzstan, (or the “Kyrgyz Republic”, to give it its proper name), is a small, landlocked, mountainous, country in the heart of Central Asia.

The country is crisscrossed by massive mountain ranges, which divide the country into quite diverse regions – offering different forms of landscape, climate, wildlife and culture. Over ninety percent of the country is over 1500m – and can be classified as mountainous. The country boasts several peaks that are over 7000m high, including Khan Tengri, Peak Pobeda and Lenin Peak.

Lake Issyk Kul is the second largest mountain lake in the world – ringed by the imposing Terskei and Kungey Ala Too mountain ridges. Son Kul is an impressive mountain lake set on an isolated, treeless, mountain plateau and in summer provides lush grassland for the nomad Kyrgyz to pasture their flocks of sheep and herds of horses, yaks, and even the occasional camel.

There are several parks and nature reserves, established to help preserve the delicate ecological balance, and protect the variety of wildlife which includes eagles, bears, wolves, deer, Marco Polo sheep and snow leopards – including Ala Archa, Issyk Kul, and Sary Chelek.

Over the centuries, several different civilizations have populated the land: from the ancient Saks around the 8th Century BC, (who clashed with the armies of Alexander the Great), through the empires of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, to assimilation into the Russian empire in the eighteenth century and the Soviet Union in the twentieth. Recently it has achieved the status of an independent state – and even experienced its own “Colour Revolution”.

Sitting astride many of the routes which made up the Great Silk Road, the local population experienced a mix of religion, culture and cuisine ... which can still be experienced to this day. Although little actually remains of the great Silk Road cities, the Burana Tower, the Uzgen complex, and the caravanserai of Tash Rabat offer a glimpse of what they must have looked like.

More modern cities exist ... including the capital Bishkek, (with all the features one would expect to find in a modern capital city); Osh, (which is thought to been a city over 3000 years ago); Karakol, (a former Cossack garrison town, with colonial style houses, a thriving Sunday animal market, fascinating Russian Church and fine Dungan mosque).

The traditional culture of the nomadic Kyrgyz is still reflected in many aspects of modern life. There are many symbols which the Kyrgyz use to identify themselves, ranging from: the tunduk, (found in the yurt – a traditional felt tent-like structure used as housing by nomadic shepherds); the Al Kalpak, (a white felt hat worn by Kyrgyz males), the komuz, (a three stringed musical instrument fashioned out of apricot wood); to the shyrdak and ala kiyiz, (traditional felt carpets with stylized patterns).

The traditional lifestyle of the nomadic Kyrgyz included a distinctive style of music; the Manas epic poem recited by a manaschy (visit <http://manas.freenet.kg> to find out more); hunting with eagles, a variety of traditional games and numerous forms of crafts. Several cultural festivals are held at various places throughout the summer and it is also possible to organise concerts and demonstrations at various places throughout the country.

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Basic Information

GEOGRAPHY

Longitude	Bishkek – 74° East	Similar to New Delhi
Latitude	Bishkek – 42° North	Similar to Istanbul, Madrid, New York
Elevation	Highest – 7437 m – Peak Pobeda Lowest – 401 m – The Lailak district in the Ferghana Valley Average – 2750 m Bishkek – 750 m 93% of Kyrgyzstan higher than 1500 m above sea level, and 41% above 3000m.	
Area	198,500 sq. km (76641 sq. miles) Similar to England and roughly equal to the combined areas of Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands.	
Distances	925 km East-West: 453 km North-South The total length of Kyrgyzstan's borders is 4508 km.	
Neighbouring Countries	China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	
Capital City	Bishkek	

THE PEOPLE

Population	5,5 million Approximately one sixth of the population lives in Bishkek. The Kyrgyz make up just over 50% of the population – of the over 70 other nationalities the major ones are: Russians (17%), Uzbeks (13%), Ukrainians, Germans and Tartars. 40% of the population is under 14 years old 8% of the population is over 60 years old	
Religion	Muslim (Sunni), and Russian Orthodox	
Languages	State – Kyrgyz. Official – Russian, (In common use especially in the capital and Northern region).	

THE ECONOMY

Agriculture	Agricultural production is the largest sector of the Kyrgyz economy accounting for something like 40% of the country's GDP.	
Industry	The Kyrgyz industrial base is not exactly strong. The size of the domestic market, distance from foreign markets and lack of natural resources do not help its development. The main industrial sectors of the economy are mining, (gold, coal, mercury and antimony, ceramics, there is a little oil in the south of the country); power generation, (especially hydro electrical – with 21 power plants the country produces enough to supply local needs and also export to its neighbours; processing of agricultural products; electronics and textiles.	

MISCELLANEOUS

Time zones	GMT + 6 In 2005 it was decided NOT to observe Daylight Saving Time in summer months.	
Unit of currency	The Som – introduced in 1994. In February 2007 1USD was worth approximately KGS39 and 1EUR KGS50.	
Water	It is normally safe to drink tap water in large cities. Bottled spring and mineral water is available throughout the country.	
Electricity Supply	220 Volt, 50 Hz	

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Tourism

Tourism has long been recognized as having great potential for contributing to the country's economy – and helping to reduce poverty, which is rife in the remote rural regions. For this reason, it has been declared a priority area for government policy – 2001 being declared as the “Year for the Support and Development of Tourism”.

Having said that, tourism accounts for just 4% of the Gross National Product – which is below that for many, (if not most), countries which seek to present themselves as a Tourist Destination. It is clearly the hope that this will increase, and in doing so, will help improve incomes and standards of living – not to mention tax revenues.

During the Soviet period, the republic was basically closed to foreigners, who had to obtain special permits to travel here. Large numbers of citizens of the Soviet Union spent their holidays here – mainly at resorts on Lake Issyk Kul. By far the vast majority of tourists to the country still come from the CIS countries (the former Soviet Republics – particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and the Siberian regions of the Russian Federation), but the number of tourists from other (“Western”) countries is growing.

The country has many advantages which make it attractive as a tourist destination – not least, the landscape, natural environment and traditional culture of the people. Unfortunately, there are also a number of drawbacks, such as: lack of awareness or recognition amongst potential tourists – especially in the West; the distance, and accessibility, from many of the target markets from where tourists will come; a less than “perfect” infrastructure and levels of service; and a number of “crises” which have hit the tourism industry all over the world, such as natural disasters, terrorism, and SARS. All of these have had impacts on the development of tourism in Kyrgyzstan – some positively, but others negatively.

There are four major types (or trends) of tourism which have been identified,

1. **Recreational** – for example, at resorts on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul.
2. **Adventure Tourism** – which includes mountaineering, trekking, horse riding, white water rafting, hunting, ...
3. **“Silk Road” Tourism** – which is a term for those transiting through the country between, for example, the ancient cities of Uzbekistan and exotic, orient (that is: China).
4. **Business Tourism** – which includes “shop tourism” (traders travelling between markets), conferences (for example using the facilities in Bishkek, or on Lake Issyk Kul) and other people travelling “on business”.

There are two other trends which are subsumed into the second and third groups – Ecotourism and “cultural” tourism. These are perhaps best reflected by the growth of the Community Based Tourism (CBT) groups which have developed around the country – by far the best known of these groups is “Shepherd’s Life”. These groups have been supported in their development by a range of foreign aid agencies – “Donor Agencies” – like GTZ (Germany), DFID (the United Kingdom), JICA (Japan), but especially Helvetas (Switzerland).

As the economy has been liberalized – with many enterprises, such as hotels and sanatoria, being privatized – there has been a burgeoning growth in the number of enterprises offering tourist services. The vast majority of these are located in the capital, Bishkek, and the Issyk Kul region.

Reasons to Visit Kyrgyzstan

The Mountains

The mountains are a major feature of the Kyrgyz landscape. Generally – anything above 1500 meters is counted as mountainous and over 94% of the country lies above 1000 meters a.s.l. and 71% above 2000 meters. The country boasts a number of 7000-meter peaks, several of which have been climbed only in relatively recent times – and many virgin peaks – yet to be climbed.

There are over 88 major mountain ranges in Kyrgyzstan, most of them forming the Tien Shan System – the Celestial Mountains. Most of the ranges vary in length from 100 kilometres to 300 kilometres – the longest, (Kokshaal) is 582 kilometres long and the Kyrgyz Range, lying to the South of Bishkek, is 454 kilometres long.

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Most ranges are between 10 and 40 kilometres wide. **The Tien Shan Mountains** – is the largest mountain range in Asia, in surface area; length (2800km); and width (at one point reaching 800 km wide) – with a total of 40 peaks over 6000m.

The relief of the mountains varies extensively from Massif to Alpine and many different types of landscape can be experienced. Woods tend to be located on North facing slopes, where snow lies longer whilst grassland meadows, (jailoo), tend to be located on southern facing slopes which benefit greater from the warming effects of the sun's rays.

The mountains of Kyrgyzstan hold many attractions for mountaineers and trekkers. The difficulties faced by mountaineers are exacerbated by the weather – it can snow suddenly and for several days at a time – increasing the risks of avalanches and crevices.

Wildlife

With over 80 species of mammals, 330 species of birds, 50 species of fish and about 30 of reptiles and amphibians, Kyrgyzstan has a rich and diverse wildlife.

Examples include: badgers, bears, camels, eagles, foxes, gophers, gulls, hawks, horses, lynxes, marmots, martens, mountain goats, porcupines, raven, sheep, snow leopards, Turkmen rats, wolves, woodpeckers, yak. Hunting and hawking take place in the mountain regions (2000-3000m a.s.l.). Some of the animals found in Kyrgyzstan are recorded in «Red Book» of International Nature Preserve Union: the snow leopard, the «Mensbir» marmot, the «dzheiran», red wolf, and grey monitor lizard. There are recognised to be some 92 endangered species of animals and 65 types of plants in Kyrgyzstan. To protect the wide variety of both flora and fauna, the country has created a number of special preserves, parks and natural reserves.

Nomadic Lifestyle

The Kyrgyz people are one of the nomadic Turkic peoples – that have roamed Central Asia over the centuries. The nomadic way of life was so ingrained into the Kyrgyz psychology that even the communist system, with collectivisation, proved incapable (and eventually unwilling) to break it down. The nomadic tradition is so strong that some say that it is only in death, when he is buried, that a Kyrgyz stop wandering. Kyrgyz graveyards are interesting sites, often set on high ground and instead of simple headstones, a small mausoleum is constructed from clay bricks, or a steel frame of a yurt placed over the grave.

For centuries, and even today, the backbone of the economy has been animal husbandry – sheep, yak and horse breeding for wool, meat, milk and fat. For centuries horses and sheep were the main currency of exchange to buy goods, a weapon or even a wife. The main source of protein for much of the population comes from kurut, (small balls of cheese made from sheep milk – especially in the winter) and kymyz or koumiss, (fermented mare's milk – a strong and bitter drink).

Horses play an important role in the life of nomadic peoples, and Kyrgyz ponies were famous and prized possession because they were strong and sturdy, bred to travel great distances with flocks and herds of animals. Children would be placed in a saddle and learn to ride a horse almost as soon as they learn to walk. Even today, herds of horses can be seen wandering mountain pastures.

The yurt is the traditional dwelling of the nomadic peoples of Central Asia – including the Kyrgyz. They are found from Anatolia to Mongolia and it is not possible to say which of the ancient nomadic tribes originally developed the traditional design. However, it is clearly a very ancient device. The yurt is still in use by people throughout the region and plays an important role in the lifestyle of the Kyrgyz “chaban”, or shepherd, and although styles of architecture and city planning come and go, the yurt remains a stable and lasting link with the past. Although basically similar, there are different styles of yurt. A Kyrgyz yurt, for example is taller than a Kazakh yurt, with a steeper roof and smaller circumference. The Kyrgyz refer to the yurt as the “boz ui” – the grey house. In ancient times ordinary nomads could not use the best quality felt to cover their yurts and they used the wool remains of black and grey colours. The khan's yurts would be dressed in snow-white felt and were called “ak-orgo” or white yurts.

The Silk Road

The story of the Silk Road is full of fearless explorers, military campaigns, religious pilgrims and great thinkers as well as humble and enterprising traders who risked both life and limb travelling in caravans across deserts, mountains and steppes.

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There was no such thing as a single “Silk Road” – rather, there were a number of different routes used by ancient traders. Some of the main ones certainly ran through Kyrgyzstan, both in the North (coming over the mountains from China and down from what is now Kazakhstan past lake Issyk Kul then along the Chui river), but another variant ran over the Torugart Pass (Tuergate, Torugart) in Central Kyrgyzstan then through Naryn and down the Chui river, while a third (southern) variant came over the Irkeshtam Pass in the South (then through the city of Osh, which celebrated its 3000th year in 2000).

Kyrgyzstan boasts many Silk Road highlights – but unfortunately, in most cases little remains in the form of magnificent ruins ... but archaeologists have discovered much evidence of the existence of many important trading posts at Osh, Uzgen (where a minaret and three mausoleums are all that remain), and several other places. Not far from Bishkek are the sites of three ancient trading cities – Balassagyn (where the Burana Tower stands), Ak Beshim and Nevkat (Navekat). Perhaps the best preserved Silk Road Monument is the Caravanserai at Tash Rabat.

For those travellers who want to explore the Silk Road, then China offers the flavour of the mysterious orient, Uzbekistan has the magnificent ruins of ancient settlements, and Kyrgyzstan offers the traveller with imagination the chance to see what the hardships of the ancient traders, the terrain that they had to traverse and to capture the atmosphere of the authentic Silk Road.

Health Resorts

Issyk Kul is known of the Pearl of the Tien Shan – and the Kyrgyz are very proud of the lake. Visitors who spend any time here may be asked over and over again, whenever they meet new acquaintances, if they have been to Issyk Kul.

This was the centre of the tourist industry for many years ... with many visitors coming from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Siberia to relax on the lake shores. Most Western clients do not want to spend a week “sunning themselves” on the beach – after all, they have other beaches closer to home. However, on a tour a visit to the lake can be enjoyable – and offers the chance of a “relaxing break”. There are many choices for different types of accommodation: hotels, resorts, sanatoria, guesthouses, yurts, homestays, camping ...,

Kyrgyzstan is rich in variety of mineral waters. Many of them are held to have curative properties and were the basis for establishing spas and sanatoria. There are over 50 thermal springs, including Kochkor Ata, Djety Oguz, Issyk Ata and Ak Suu. Curative mud (derived from silt and silt-peat) is found mainly in the Issyk Kul region and was the basis of several sanatoria which have been established on the lake shores, although other deposits are to be found in the Chui and Osh oblasts.

Travel to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country in the heart of Central Asia. It is not exactly in the centre of the Eurasian continent – that lies further to the North – but it is almost about as far from the sea as it is possible to get.

Although the number of access routes into the country are increasing – but it is not exactly the easiest place to get to.

Land Routes:

Having been on the Silk Road, there are overland routes ...

- by road from:
 - China (Kashgar);
 - Kazakhstan, (e.g. Almaty);
 - Uzbekistan (e.g. from Tashkent – via Kazakhstan – or through the Ferghana valley);
 - Tajikistan (e.g. from Murghab).
- There is a rail link to Bishkek, which is sometimes used by those travelling via Moscow. It is a long, convoluted, journey – but in theory it is possible to link with other European networks ... and even, with lots of changes – and overnights – to travel all the way from the farthest corners of Europe by train.

Flight Information:

Most visitors, who aren't travelling the Silk Road, fly to Central Asia. There are three main gateways available for Kyrgyzstan – Almaty, Tashkent and (of course) Bishkek. Each has their advantages, and their disadvantages.

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There are currently two airports designated as International Airports in Kyrgyzstan: Manas airport in Bishkek; Osh in the South of the country. For most people from the West, Bishkek is the probably the only destination for direct access.

It is also possible to use Almaty in Kazakhstan or Tashkent in Uzbekistan as a “Gateway to Central Asia” and both cities have more flight connections than Bishkek.

Via Almaty

Almaty used to be the capital of Kazakhstan and is still a major hub for airlines. The main route between Bishkek and Almaty is the main road. From Almaty to Bishkek is about 3 hours by car, or 5 hours or so by local bus. You need a transit (or full) visa to cross Kazakh territory – and you are using Almaty as gateway for both directions then you will need a double entry visa. There is also a road from Tiup at the Eastern tip of Lake Issyk Kul, round the Eastern end of the Kungei Ala Too mountain range – to the Karkyra valley and through Kegen and then it is possible to proceed to Almaty. There is no public transport. Much of the road up to the border is not asphalt.

Via Tashkent

If you plan to travel overland then, of course, you will need an Uzbek visa. If you want to travel by road, or rail, between Bishkek and Tashkent, then you will also need a transit visa for Kazakhstan. (The trip takes from 8-12 hours). There are buses. Alternatively, there are flights between Bishkek and Tashkent most days of the week, operated by Uzbek airlines, with connections to many destinations worldwide – including Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand. Currently, if you are simply in transit and will be in the transit lounge at Tashkent airport for less than 24 hours then you will not need a transit visa.

Via China

There are two land crossings between Kyrgyzstan and China open to passenger traffic – the Torugart Pass, which is technically closed to foreign citizens and although it possible to arrange a crossing there are restrictions and it can be expensive and the Irkeshtam Pass which doesn't have the same restrictions and a bus services operates between Osh and Kashgar. There are also several flights each week between Urumqi and Bishkek.

Travel around Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic is a small country and the distances between cities in the country are not very great. However, the mountains divide the country into a number of quite separate regions. Journeys by road between them can be difficult and slow – especially in winter when many mountain passes are closed. There is only one major route between the North and South – the main Bishkek-Osh highway. As a result domestic air services provide an important means of transport.

Internal Flights

There are seven civil airports which serve domestic flights: Karakol, Cholpon Ata, Kazarman, Batken, Djalal Abad, Isfana and Issyk Kul (Tamchy). Existence of an airfield, however, does not imply the existence of flights. Although there are several flights a day between Bishkek and Osh, other airports are less well served – and some do not have any scheduled flights.

Roads

There are about 36000 kilometres of roads in Kyrgyzstan – but not all of them are asphalt, and some of the mountain roads in particular may be rather difficult at times. Snow can fall in the mountains in every month of the year and close a road for several days. Some roads are closed throughout the winter period. For example, the Kazarman-Djalal Abad road is closed for eight months of the year, but recent road works have been undertaken to cut this to just six. The mountains divide the country up into several distinct regions – and travel between them is limited by the number of routes available. The vital routes are: Bishkek–Osh; Bishkek–Naryn–Torugart, Bishkek–Issyk Kul.

Public Transport:

Long Distance Bus Services

There is a system of bus routes and most big towns have a bus station (“avtovokzal”) where long distance taxi drivers also congregate and collect passengers. Aging and rusty buses dating from the Soviet period still ply many of the routes. They tend to be cheap – but slow.

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Tickets for seats and stowed luggage (there is usually a charge for stowing additional baggage in the luggage bay underneath) are purchased from booths. Often a booth is responsible for only certain routes – so it might be necessary to search for the right one. It is worth turning up early, because there is often a crowd and the bus may leave early if it is full.

Minibuses operating out of bus stations on long distance routes tend to wait until they are full rather than on a set timetable. They are more expensive than the larger buses – but are usually quicker, not stopping en route.

Local Bus Services

In the larger cities – there may be local bus routes. Bishkek, Osh and Naryn also have trolley buses. Minibuses (“marshroutka”) also operate on several set routes around many of the larger towns and on the main bus routes. The minibuses are usually run by private individuals – but are regulated and licensed – and the trolley buses are operated by the city authorities. Fares are standard – and regulated.

Usually buses stop at designated bus stops but minibuses can be flagged down at any point on their route. The buses tend to have two doors – you get into the bus using the door in the middle, and leave via the one at the front. For both buses and minibuses, you pay on entry.

Taxis

Local taxis do tend to be a cheap way to get around. Prices are negotiable ... and if you are a foreigner, you may well be asked for more than a local would pay. It may also vary according to factors such as the weather and time of day. Ask before you get into the taxi and if you think you are being asked to pay too much, don't be afraid to say “No” and walk away. As a rough guide, most of the taxi firms charge about 75 soms during the day and 120 at night for a journey within the city ... but if you stop off en-route – for example two people sharing a taxi but being dropped off at different addresses – this counts as two journeys (i.e. the cost would be 150 or 240 soms). The quality of driver and vehicle, however, can vary.

Between towns taxis tend to operate between bus stations. These taxis usually take four paying passengers – three sitting on the back seat and one in the front passenger seat – and usually wait until they are full before departure. Taxis for Osh can be arranged from the car park at the end of Toktogul Street, behind Osh Market.

Rail

The construction of railways in Central Asia began in the Russian Empire, and was consolidated in the Soviet Union. It was primarily aimed at the distribution of coal and industrial output across the vast distances between the region and the markets of Western Russia. The main routes are from the Kazakh border, through Bishkek and onto to Balykchy at the Western end of Lake Issyk Kul, and from Uzbekistan into Djalal Abad and Osh.

Driving

Make sure you have all the right registration documents – we suggest you contact the embassy to check what is required. If the vehicle is in transit (i.e. you will leave Kyrgyzstan in it) there should be no customs duties etc. If the driver is not the registered owner of the vehicle (or the owner is not one of the passengers) then he will need authorization to drive – a “doverennost”. You will also need an international driver's licence.

In addition, by law in Kyrgyzstan, every vehicle is supposed to carry:

- A First Aid Kit
- A fire extinguisher
- An "Emergency Triangle" which can be placed as a warning sign in the event of an incident (accident or breakdown) to warn oncoming drivers
- "Wheel stops", (2), to place under the wheels on a slope to prevent it rolling in the event of break failure.
- A tow-rope: (3m or 5m)

We also recommend that drivers carry a small shovel – especially in winter if travelling in areas where there is likely to be snow – and spare bulbs for the lights, indicators etc.

People often ask if it is possible to arrange "self-drive" vehicle hire. Although Hertz "Rent-a-Car" had a franchise in Bishkek – and you can still find references to it on the internet – it has closed and the answer is basically, “No.”

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Cycling

There aren't that many cyclists in Kyrgyzstan. As a result, they may attract a lot of attention. For example, in the cities, they may attract the attention of policemen, (acting officially or otherwise). Another nuisance (throughout the country) can be drunken people, at any time of the day. Cyclists should try to keep out of their way, or just be friendly and try to move on. Another potential problem arising from the fact that there are few cyclists in Kyrgyzstan is that drivers are not always familiar about how to drive when they meet one, although generally they are very attentive to cyclists and tend to give them a wide berth.

It is possible to set up camp just about everywhere in the country – although there are a couple of restricted areas – at the eastern end of Lake Issyk Kul, for example – or you may need permits – for example in the Ak Sai valley near the Chinese border.

When to travel to Kyrgyzstan

The “tourist season” in Kyrgyzstan is traditionally in the summer months – from mid-June to mid-September. This is when most people visit – especially those from the countries of the former Soviet Union who spend their holidays on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul. The days are warm – indeed they can be hot – but the nights are cool.

The climate of Kyrgyzstan is continental – that means hot summers and cold winters. A climate of extremes – and because people often feel more uncomfortable in the extreme cold of the winter, they sometimes forget that the summers can also be extreme – hot and dry! Temperatures can vary widely even on the same day, at the same place – it is possible to experience “all four seasons” in one day – especially when travelling in the mountains – where snow can fall even in the height of summer, in July and August.

The choice of when to travel however depends very much on the purpose of the journey (bird watching, winter sports, cultural tours ...).

Some weather statistics:

The average number of days of sunshine per year is 322 (although in 1999 Bishkek received only 247). Even in winter when there can be heavy falls of snow, the sun can shine brightly. Thaws are frequent and melted snow can refreeze overnight making a treacherous surface for both pedestrians and vehicles.

The average minimal temperature across the country: -24°C

Average Daily Temperature in the valleys: in July: 25-27°C, in January: -4°C

Average Annual Temperature:

- in Bishkek: -1°C
- in Osh: 0°C

The average annual rainfall is 380 mm, mostly falling in April.

Staying in Kyrgyzstan

There is a wide variety of options for accommodation in Kyrgyzstan.

There is a considerable range of styles accommodation available. Depending upon how long you stay and what you plan to do. We usually recommend broadening your experience by staying in a variety of different types of accommodation ... for example:

- A hotel in Bishkek;
- A Sanatoria / Resort on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul
- A Guest house in Karakol
- A homestay in Kochkor
- A yurt in Son Kul

However, it has to be noted that the standard and quality of accommodation will vary throughout the country. Most of the accommodation is basic. That is not to say sub-standard ... but the international traveller who is used to “home comforts” may find the level of facilities less than they are used to. At the moment, for example, very few hotels have any official “star” rating. If you insist on 4-star accommodation, then you are limited to two hotels in Bishkek – and none elsewhere in the country.

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Considerable work is being undertaken at many of the hotels, resorts, sanatoria, etc. throughout the country – with both large and small developments. There is considerable investment being made – and planned for the future – in improving the “hotel stock” in the country.

Many of the families offering Bed and Breakfast in a homestay are members of one of the Community Based Tourism (CBT) groups which operate as part of the KCBTA network. The Association unites about twenty local CBT groups and five “Shepherd’s Life” groups offering accommodation and other services for tourists.

Not all homestays in Kyrgyzstan are members of a CBT group. To participate in the scheme the homestay is inspected annually and awarded a sign to display to show that they belong to a local CBT group. Each participating homestay is then awarded a grade, based on the level of comfort and facilities available: the Edelweiss. The three levels, (indicated by one, two or three Edelweiss – three is the highest) define the different price levels charged for accommodation.

Some of Kyrgyzstan’s more exotic providers of Bed and Breakfast are local shepherds in a high mountain pasture – a jailoo. Accommodation is in a yurt – a round felt tent, (also known as a “boz ui”) – the largest of which can accommodate up to ten people. Here it is possible to experience the centuries-old nomadic way of life – taste national dishes, see how goats, cows, mares are milked, drink a cup of koumiss, (fermented mare’s milk), taste home made bread and, in some places, fresh fish from a nearby lake.

Formalities

The regulations and procedures change from time to time – so anything in print, (for example, in a guidebook or on a web page) may have been correct at the time it was written – but not at the time you travel. As a result it is best to ask us – and we will try to answer as clearly as possible with the exact requirements as they stand at that time.

Visas

A visa is a formal stamp, normally placed in the traveller's passport, granting permission to enter (and / or leave) the country. Technically, however, it does not provide a guarantee that the traveller will be allowed to enter the country – as that decision is delegated to the official at the immigration, or passport control, post at the point of entry. (In practice, it is very rare for entry to be denied). The law and regulations concerning visas change from time to time ... and this has been the cause of much confusion. There is also considerable discussion within Kyrgyzstan about ways of simplifying the system even further. The current (2006) situation is as follows: **most visitors to the Kyrgyz Republic require a visa**; however, there are three regimes which operate.

In fact, Kyrgyzstan operates one of the most liberal visa regimes in the former Soviet Union – and probably the most liberal in Central Asia. The biggest problem facing the visitor is likely to be “where to apply” because the number of Kyrgyz embassies and Consular offices is quite small.

Visa Free Regime: Citizens of the following countries do not need visas:

Azerbaijan, Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Georgia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Malaysia (for “service” and tourist purposes up to 1month), Moldavia, Mongolia (for up to 3 months), North Korea, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Tajikistan, Turkey (for up to 1 month), Ukraine, Vietnam, Yugoslavia.

Simplified Visa Regime:

In 2002 arrangements were made so that the citizens of some 28 Western countries could obtain a visa, valid for up to one month, from Kyrgyz Consular Office, without an invitation – on the basis of a personal application. This was confirmed by an order from the government (No. 213, dated 15/04/2003). These countries include:

Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USA.

Even if you are from one of the 28 Western countries listed, the consular official considering the application may still ask, however, for an invitation, or other documentation. For example, if the applicant is not a citizen in the

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country where they are applying; or if the application is for more than one month; or for a multiple entry visa. The only way to be sure what rules will be applied in your case is to contact the embassy to ask.

The "Ordinary" Visa Regime, (although it is not referred to as such in the legislation): Citizens of all other countries are required to have an invitation – and this involves applying for **visa support** from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bishkek, (basically having the invitation registered and approved).

In addition: Citizens of certain countries need an invitation registered with the Consular department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bishkek. Even though, generally, the Kyrgyz Republic enjoys good diplomatic relations with these countries, special procedures are applied and the process takes two weeks instead of the usual one week. These countries include:

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Iran, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the United Arab Emirates.

OVIR

OVIR is an abbreviation, which stands for the Visa and Registration Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Don't be surprised if you find that there is some confusion about the situation concerning registering with OVIR. The situation constantly changes.

Kyrgyz law currently states that foreign visitors, including tourists, must register with OVIR within three working days of their arrival in the country. **However**, the government issued an order (No. 213, dated 15/04/03) which decreed that citizens of 28 countries in the country for up to one month no longer needed to register. This was later superseded by amendments to the law "on External Migration". The current situation (2006) is that:

- Citizens of countries for which a "visa free" regime operates (see above), and
- Citizens of countries for which a "simplified visa" regime operates,

do not have to register if their stay in the Kyrgyz Republic is for less than 60 days (or 90 days in the case of Russian and Kazakh citizens). If their stay is for more than this limit, then they have to register in the normal way.

Citizens of all other countries are still required to register within five days of their arrival in the country.

Visitors are supposed to register in the town where they enter the country. If, however, they cannot do so for some reason then they can register in another town, but they should do so within the three working days.

We can arrange registration, where necessary, for our clients here in Bishkek, or in Naryn. However, you can do so yourself – it is not very expensive, just time consuming and it can be confusing, especially if you don't speak the language or complications arise. If you are lucky the process can take just about half an hour – but it could take all day, and even then you may encounter complications, which mean that you haven't succeeded. We offer a service whereby we can help you to register for a small fee.

If you are late registering with OVIR, then you will have to pay a fine, and the person or organization inviting you can also be fined.

If you don't register then you could have trouble if a policeman stops you and asks for your papers – it is one of the things he will check. Also, you may have trouble leaving the country. For example, the border authorities may fine you and you will not be allowed into Kazakhstan without a valid registration. If by any chance you do get in, you will be fined later (for example, at the airport).

If it looks like you are going to overstay your visa then it is sometimes possible to extend it at the Central OVIR, (near the main post office).

Permits

To visit Kyrgyzstan you must have a valid passport, and (depending on your nationality) visa and registration.

Permits are required for certain "border zones". These zones include the areas around Khan Tengri, and the Enilchek glacier, the Ak-Sai valley and Lake Chatyr Kul near Torugart. (For Torugart, tourists are allowed to

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transit the border zone if they have a valid Chinese visa, are going to China and are accompanied by the representative – a guide and / or driver – without needing a permit. For trekking in the zone, however, a permit is necessary!).

Border permits can take some time to arrange – so it is best to try and obtain them in advance. Your tour company should be able to arrange this for you.

There are also a few closed zones to which foreigners are not allowed – most notable around the Russian naval base at the Eastern end of Lake Issyk Kul.

Customs

Customs procedures, rules and regulations change from time to time.

Declarations: If you arrive at Manas airport you may enter through the Green Channel, (assuming it is operating at that time), which means you don't have to fill in a form ... although you may still have to answer questions verbally. In any case, Kyrgyz authorities do not insist that you keep a Customs form and show it on leaving.

If you arrive at other points you may, or may not, be asked to complete a customs declaration form. At Torugart you will have to complete one, but if you are arriving by road from Almaty, Tashkent or at Osh, then don't be surprised if you are not asked to complete one.

In Kyrgyzstan you only need to fill in one form ... you do not need to keep one and show it on leaving the country, even if the form says so. Officials will give you a second form if you ask for one – but they usually collect both from you and say you don't need it.

Duty Free: The duty free concessions are designed to apply for goods brought into the country for either personal use or for use by members of the traveller's family. As such the list of goods includes things like TVs, fridges, carpets, crystal wear etc. If the customs official thinks that the goods are intended for sale, they can impose duties.

The following goods may be imported into Kyrgyzstan without incurring customs duty:

- 200 cigarettes – if you are over 16, (incidentally, there is no mention in the current list of cigars or other tobacco products!);
- 2 liters of alcoholic beverages – if you are over 21;
- Gifts and goods for personal use up to an equivalent value of US\$500 and up to a weight limit of 50 kg.

Prohibited imports listed in the rules include:

- weapons, ammunition and explosives,
- narcotics and drug paraphernalia,
- pornography or other published material deemed harmful to state interests and,
- any item prohibited elsewhere in Kyrgyz legislation.

The rules used to specify a limited amount of perfume – but this is not in the current list. There are limits on the amount of jewellery. The full list also mentions clothes made of leather and fur.

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Registering souvenirs: When you leave the country you have to fill in a customs declaration saying if you have bought any antique items etc. Although practically no-one will tell you this when selling them to you, issues may arise mainly in relation to paintings, old jewellery or carpets / wall-hangings, etc. The main issue is that you need permission to export antiques, or articles of historic and cultural value, (basically, but not exclusively, things over 50 years old). Therefore, you need some proof that what you buy is not an antique – or, if it is old, that it is of no cultural significance – and you do this by registering your purchase with the Ministry of Culture and obtaining permission to export them. Only then can you legally take them out of the country. This permission is your proof that they are not “antiques” or “objects of cultural significance” according to the regulations. You need to show this registration certificate to customs when you depart from Kyrgyzstan (even if you leave via Almaty). Otherwise the goods may be confiscated (or you have to pay a “fine”). Ask us for more detailed information (e.g. a list of objects forbidden to export – artefacts, items of significant historical or artistic value, etc.).

Activities

Kyrgyzstan has many attractions apart from the mountains; lakes, such as Issyk Kul, Son Kul and Sary Chelek; and wildlife, there are cities such as Bishkek, Osh and Karakol; ancient sites such as the Burana Tower, the Uzgen complex, Tash Rabat caravanserai; petroglyphs at Saimaluu Tash and Cholpon Ata; mausoleums such as the Manas mausoleum at Talas, and at Safed Bulan and much more ...

It is possible to undertake a variety of activities, such as:

- **Sightseeing** – for example, in Bishkek or many of the other cities;
- **Recreation** – rest and relaxation, for example on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul;
- **Trekking and Walking** – in the midst of virgin, natural, surroundings;
- **Horse riding** – for an hour or for several days – in Ala Archa, Barskoon, Shamsly, Issyk Kul, Son Kul, Tash Rabat – or just about anywhere in the country;
- **Cycling** – although not all the roads are exactly “cycle friendly” there are plenty of opportunities for demanding mounting biking throughout the country;
- **White water rafting**, for example on the waters of the Chui or Kekemerren Rivers;
- **Motor Tours** – around Kyrgyzstan which offer the possibility to combine many different experiences and get the most out of the many varied and diverse aspects of this country;
- **Silk Road Tours** – experience the majestic mountains that separate the ancient cities of Uzbekistan and the mysterious Orient as represented by China ... and get an impression of the country through which ancient traders travelled.
- **Cultural Tours** – stay in shepherd’s yurt to experience the nomadic lifestyle – both the hardships and the pleasures; combine your trip with a visit to one of the many cultural festivals; visit the place where St. Matthew is said to be buried; see the places contained in the novels of Chinghiz Aitmatov;
- **Nature Tours** – with a wide variety of wildlife, birds and flowers, it is possible to organise trips to suit almost any interest;

There are **facilities** (especially in Bishkek and around Issyk Kul) ideal for conducting **conferences, seminars,** etc.

Although The Celestial Mountains Tour Company does not organize the following activities – there are plenty of opportunities throughout Kyrgyzstan for:

- **Mountaineering** –the Tien Shan provide a paradise for mountaineers of almost any calibre and experience;
- **Skiing and heliskiing** – especially in the winter months – where basic facilities can be outweighed by the opportunity to explore virgin snows;
- **Caving** – for example, in the spectacular caves of Chil Ustun.

Horse Riding

The horse is a major feature of Kyrgyz culture. Young boys learn to ride almost as soon as they can walk. It is not surprising, therefore, that horse riding tours, or itineraries with opportunities for some horse riding are popular. Horse riding is possible just about anywhere in the country.

Most of the horses used for tours are “working horses” – the local people use them for travelling when looking after their livestock in the mountain jiloo. Take time to become acquainted with your mount.

Helmets: It is advisable for riders to bring a helmet with them. Although some are available, it will probably feel more comfortable if they have their own.

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Tackle: Saddles and other equipment may be fairly basic.
Please make sure that your travel insurance covers horse riding.

Rafting

There are a wide range of rivers which provide the possibility for challenging routes for those with all skill levels, from novice to experienced. There are quiet rivers, flowing through beautiful mountain landscapes, as well as rapids of different levels of difficulty. The level of difficulty on each river can vary depending on local conditions, such as the amount of melt water descending from the thawing glaciers. At the height of the summer, the water level of some rivers can actually vary on a daily basis.

The rafting season is usually between April and October, but can vary according to the particular river. The end of August and September is the best time on some rivers. The water level in the rivers rise in the spring – with ice melt adding to the both the volume and speed of the water flowing downstream – and falls in the autumn.

The most popular rivers are the Chui, Chon Kemin, Kekemerren, Chatkal and Naryn. There is a camp on the Chui River near the Boom gorge – and this area is designated as the "National White Water Arena" and serves as a training ground for the whole of Central Asia.

There are a number of firms in Kyrgyzstan which specialize in arranging rafting tours. And it is necessary to have special clothing and insurance cover for rafting.

Major Events

National Holidays

Jan 1st	– New Years Day
Jan 7th	– Orthodox Christmas
Feb 23rd	– Army Day
Mar 8th	– International Women's Day
Mar 21st	– Nooruz
May 1st	– Labour Day
May 5th	– Constitution Day
May 9th	– Victory Day
Aug 31st	– Independence Day
Nov 7th	– Anniversary of the October Revolution

In addition there are two moveable feasts based on the Muslim calendar – **Orozo Ait**, which marks the end of Ramadan and **Kurman Ait**, the day of Sacrifice.

If a holiday falls on a weekend then parliament often decides to make the Friday or the Monday a non-working day instead. This list is important for those wanting to cross Torugart and Irkeshtam because the passes are closed at weekends and on holidays.

Cultural Festivals

In the middle of September, towards the end of the traditional tourist season, a bus load of tourists from New Zealand drove up to Lake Son Kul in Central Kyrgyzstan and happened upon something which, in their words, "made their trip".

There, on the remote, treeless, mountain plateau, with a backdrop of high mountain peaks and overlooking a serene lake, they came across a family celebrating a traditional Kyrgyz wedding. Crowds of relatives had gathered for the celebrations. In keeping with the tradition of nomadic hospitality which typifies the Kyrgyz, they welcomed the newcomers and invited them to participate in the celebrations.

A plentiful bounty of food was scattered over several dastorkons – "tablecloths" spread on the floor – supplemented by the group's packed lunches. An impromptu game of Kok Boru – a horse game, like polo, played with the carcass of a goat in place of a ball – was underway. Other games followed, such as: At Chabysh (races), Oodarysh (wrestling on horseback) and Kyz Kuumai ("Chase the Girl"). All of this was punctuated with music as individuals took up their komuz to perform traditional melodies, or sang traditional songs.

"It was a real, authentic, experience," said one of the tourists. "We were really sorry when it was time to go."

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Many of the visitors who travel to Kyrgyzstan are intrigued by the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Kyrgyz shepherds who spend the summer living in yurts in remote jaiлоos, (high mountain pastures), and welcome the opportunity to witness such an event. Unfortunately, however, such things cannot be planned as part of a tour package. This group just happened to be lucky enough to be “in the right place at the right time” to participate in the celebrations.

It is possible, however, to time a visit to this small Central Asian republic in order to attend one, (or more), of the several festivals that are organized – and some tourists do just this. Most of the festivals concentrate on a specific theme: traditional horse games; hunting with eagles; traditional crafts; cuisine and folklore – there is even a Mountain Bike Festival and the “Annual Clean-up at Son Kul”. Many festivals, however, offer the opportunity to leisurely witness and experience many of the various aspects of traditional, nomadic, Kyrgyz culture.

Although some of these events are organized by tour companies they are not exclusively for tourists. The local character and feel of the event is preserved by the fact that they are equally popular amongst the local population, (after all, the Kyrgyz enjoy a celebration as much as anyone else), and who usually make up the majority of the people attending each festival.

Festivals in 2007:

Month	Event	Description	Venue	Organizer
March	National Horse Games	Kok Boru Competition	Bishkek Hippodrome	
March	Central Asian Crafts Fair	Crafts fair of Central Asian artisans	Bishkek, "Balazhan" Children's Centre	CACSA
March	Nooruz	Various activities in and around Bishkek	Bishkek	Gov't
April	International Jazz Festival	Concerts, “jam” sessions, masterclasses	Bishkek	SDC Gov't
May	Mountain Bike Festival	Mountain Bike races, and a programme of entertainment	Toguz Bulak ski base – near Bishkek	KMBA
July	Sabantui	Tatar National Festival with folk music from many of Kyrgyzstan's diverse nationalities, children's games, etc.	Bishkek environs	Tartar Assoc.
July	Felt Craft Traditions	Witness and participate in the processes of creating weaving, felt, Ala Kiyiz and Shyrdaks – with games and concert of traditional Music	Tash Rabat	Altyn Kol
July	Annual “Clean Up” of Son Kul	Help preserve the pristine beauty of one of Kyrgyzstan's remote beauty spots and enjoy the folklore program: traditional music, crafts, etc.	Son Kul	KCBTA
July	National Horse Games	Kok Boru, Kyz Kuumai, etc.	Cholpon Ata	NoviNomad
July	National Horse Games	Kok Boru, Kyz Kuumai, etc.	Sarala-Saz jailoo – near Kochkor	KCBTA
July	International Festival OIMO	Central Asian Crafts Fair, master classes and demonstrations, theatre and cinema, folk music and national cuisine tasting, fashion show, round table, fun competitions	Tamchy, on the Northern Shore of Lake Issyk Kul	CACSA
July	National Cuisine and Folklore	A full cultural programme of Horse games, traditional cuisine, music, crafts, erecting a yurt, etc.	Djety Oguz	NoviNomad KCBTA
August	Birds of Prey Festival	Demonstrations of eagle hunting and a folklore program: traditional music, crafts, etc.	Manzhyly-Ata near Barskoon (on the southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul)	KCBTA
August	Shepherd's Festival	A full cultural programme of Horse games, traditional cuisine, music, crafts, erecting a yurt, etc. – also helicopter flights and horse riding.	Karkyra Yurt Camp, Char Kuduk, in the Karkyra Valley	Issyk-Kul Travel
August	Felt Craft Traditions	Witness and participate in the processes of creating weaving, felt, Ala Kiyiz and Shyrdaks – with games and concert of traditional music	Ala Archa	Altyn Kol
August	Köchü Festival	A full cultural programme of Horse games, traditional cuisine, music, crafts, erecting a yurt, etc.	Naryn Oblast	KCBTA
August	Independence Day	National Kok Boru Championships	Bishkek Hippodrome	
September or November	Central Asian Crafts Fair	Crafts fair of Central Asian artisans	Bishkek, "Balazhan" Children's Centre	CACSA
October	Day of Arts and Craft Workers	October 8th is the Day of Arts and Crafts workers and a Crafts fair / exhibition is organized in Bishkek – on the second Sunday in October – with a competition for the best craft items	Museum of Fine Arts in Bishkek	Union of Folk Arts and Crafts
November	At Chabysh	Horse races, and a full program of traditional music, crafts, etc.	Barskoon, Tamga and	Kyrgyz Ate

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		on the Southern shore of Lake Issyk Kul	Tosor	
July	International Summer School	A full educational, social and cultural programme	Manas University, Bishkek	Manas University

For more detailed and up-to-date information on dates and venues please contact the organizers (see the "Addresses" and "Websites" sections).

The At Chabysh Festival

In 2005 the Kyrgyz Ate Institute organized the first international At Chabysh festival aimed at protecting and preserving both the Kyrgyz Horse and the nomadic traditions of the Kyrgyz people. The complete festival included a two day conference in Bishkek at the end of October followed by some free days to explore the country and three days of races and other activities on the southern shores of Lake Issyk Kul at the start of **November**. It is proposed to make this an annual event. In 2006 the second, enlarged festival was held; and in 2007 the third will be organized.

The dates fall outside the normal "tourist season" ... mainly because it was not intended as a festival for tourists but rather as a festival for local people. Despite the time of year, the weather in November is usually fine – with warm, sunny, days – and although the nights can be chilly, the homestays in the villages are cosy and warm.

The festival is named after the traditional long-distance races which were an ancient and widespread sport amongst the nomadic Kyrgyz. "At Chabysh" literally means "horse race" – but the long distance races have always been regarded as the ultimate challenge and test the strength and stamina of both horse and rider.

The festival was more than just a race meeting ... a number of cultural events also took place. Traditional horse games and many other skills of horsemanship ... and much more. Skilled burkutchy demonstrated the art of hunting with eagles. There were also performances by a number of local folk ensembles and soloists, (featuring traditional instruments such as the komuz), recitations from the Manas epic by contemporary manaschy, and even an American folk group. Yurts were on site to provide refreshments – besh barmak, manty, laghman, shorpo and so on. Souvenirs were also available. Other social activities were organised – including talks about the place of the horse in Kyrgyz society, film shows, and discotheques.

Perhaps, however, one of the best features of the festival is the innumerable opportunities it provides for "snapping" memorable photographs. It is possible to attend the whole festival or simply include a visit to it as part of a tour.

Manas University Summer School

In 2005 the Turkish Kyrgyz Manas University organized the first of a series of annual "International Summer Schools". The university takes its name "Manas" from the monumental epic, "Manas", a treasured expression of the Kyrgyz national heritage. Manas is a legendary national hero who fought against external enemies and reunited all his people.

The program of the Summer School is designed to offer participants an intimate peek at one of Central Asia's most diverse nations and included lectures and seminars devoted towards the history, culture, music, politics, anthropology, film and theatre, language, literature, and social life of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The International Summer School also arranges various daily and overnight tours with an opportunity to visit historic and archaeological sites within and outside Bishkek. Participants will personally experience the nomadic local life of Kyrgyz countryside. The social program also includes special days for cooking Kyrgyz national meals and tasting national beverages. Traditional horseback games show and boz ui (yurt) construction are also provided.

Contact details

The Celestial Mountains Tour Company

The Celestial Mountains Tour Company and the Celestial Mountains Guest House (Naryn) were established in 1997. They were British owned and operated ventures established, registered and licensed under Kyrgyz law. They are, actually, two separate companies – but had the same three investors.

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There are three investors. One came to Kyrgyzstan at about the time of independence and immediately fell in love with the country, its people and culture. He has since married a Kyrgyz woman, started a family and is now living in New Zealand. (Technically, his wife is now the “shareholder”). The second is based in the UK. The third came to Bishkek to help to open an office – and just stayed. He is now based in Bishkek and runs the companies.

The tour company, based in Bishkek, was established to offer tours and other services to travellers. The tours would cover the regions of Kyrgyzstan and, in co-operation with other local firms in those countries, to China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan. At first, the company chose to specialize in motor tours.

The investors felt that there were many people like themselves who weren't mountaineers or hunters, but who would still be interested in visiting Kyrgyzstan. Maybe these potential clients had spent their long vacations at University travelling to interesting parts of the world, sleeping under bridges and in doorways – but now these “thirty-somethings” had jobs and responsibilities. As students they had plenty of time available to simply wander – but little money. Now they had money – but little time – they “had to be back behind the desk on Monday week”. They wanted to visit remote and interesting places – but needed to make the most of their “two weeks” annual leave – and didn't want the hassle and discomforts they were happy to accept as students.

As part of their strategy, a number of hotels and guesthouses were planned throughout the Kyrgyz Republic, offering comfortable accommodation equipped to Western style and standards. The original plan was to establish tour itineraries travelling between them, and exploring the areas around them – events have developed somewhat differently and hence these plans have yet to be fully implemented.

The Guesthouse in Naryn was the first of these. Naryn was chosen as the site for the first investment because it has an important place on the road to the Torugart Pass – the only border crossing to China presently available for passenger traffic. A block of four apartments was purchased and converted into a small guesthouse with 12 guest rooms, clean and modern western style toilets and showers. In summer a number of yurts are also provided. Although it was originally intended to offer accommodation for tourists travelling to, or from, Torugart a growing number of travellers are spending more time in the Naryn region – visiting places like Eki Naryn, Salkyntor, Tash Rabat, At Bashy, Son Kul, and Kochkor, and guests have also included a large number of businessmen and visiting dignitaries.

Drawing upon their experiences in Naryn, the investors then planned and built a new hotel in the centre of Bishkek – The Silk Road Lodge – which opened in August 2000. It was the first (and for some time the only) hotel in Kyrgyzstan to be awarded an official star classification by Kyrgyz Gostandard. It has quickly established itself as a small, friendly, hotel – popular with tourists, businessmen, consultants and visiting dignitaries alike.

The Tour Company, the Guesthouse and the Silk Road Lodge have been featured on television and radio in Kyrgyzstan, Great Britain, Germany and Brazil and in books and newspaper articles published in Kyrgyzstan, The United Kingdom, The United States, Australia, Brazil, Spain, Germany, Thailand and China.

Technically speaking, “The Silk Road Lodge” is a part of the tour company, but the Guesthouse in Naryn is operated as a separate company which is registered in Naryn.

Ian Claytor serves as the General Director of both companies, and although the different companies have different staffs – they cooperate closely with each other and seek to maintain the same commitment to levels of service.

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(or contact the Bishkek office)

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106 Chui Prospect, Bishkek 720001, Kyrgyz Republic
Tel.: +996 312 620590, fax: +996 312 661837
Email: postmaster@mvtp.bishkek.gov.kg
Web site: www.tourism.gov.kg

Kyrgyz Tourism – Destination Marketing Association

231-19 Tynystanov Street, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic
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E-mail: dma@elcat.kg
Web site: www.dma.centralasia.kg

Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators

Room 112, 42 Isanov Street, Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic
Tel.: + 996 312 213664
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Web site: www.kat.kg

Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association (KCBTA) “Hospitality Kyrgyzstan”

59 Gorky St., Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic
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Web site: www.cbtkyrgyzstan.kg

Association of city and trekking guides

Contact person: Elizaveta Chalova, +996 502 929479 (cell phone)
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Trekking Union of Kyrgyzstan

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Central Asian Crafts Support Association (CACSA)

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www.cacsa.kg, www.catgen.com/cacsa

Websites:

1. AKI Press News Agency: www.akipress.org
2. Alpine Fund: www.alpinefund.org (the Alpine Fund is a non-profit, non-governmental organization providing education and mountain adventures to at-risk youth in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan)
3. Cango.net: www.cango.net.kg (Central Asia NGO network – Collection of voluntary organizations – political and social information)
4. Cango.net.kg: www.cango.net.kg/homepages/list.asp?country=KG (portal for Non-Government Organizations in Kyrgyzstan)
5. Doing Business in Kyrgyzstan: www.pangaeapartners.com/kyrgyz1.htm (overview from Pangaea Partners)
6. Donors.kg: www.donors.kg/en (information resource on donors activities in the Kyrgyz Republic)

Kyrgyzstan Briefing

7. Helvetas, a Swiss Association for International Cooperation – Kyrgyzstan Programme Office: www.helvetas.kg
8. Internews, a news service: www.internews.kg
9. Kyrgyz Alpine Club – for mountaineers: www.kac.centralasia.kg
10. Kyrgyz Music: www.kyrgyzmusic.com (information about Kyrgyz music, instruments and composers)
11. Kyrgyzstan resources: www.iaqi.com/kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyzstan related news, books and links)
12. Kyrgyz Style: www.kyrgyzstyle.kg (traditional Kyrgyz crafts)
13. Manas Epic: <http://manas.freenet.kg/> (All about the Manas Epic)
14. Manas International Airport, Bishkek: www.airport.kg/eng/index.html
15. National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic: http://www.nbkr.kg/web/interfeis.builder_frame?language=ENG (financial statistics, legal issues, history of banknotes)
16. Official Government website: www.gov.kg
17. Photographs and photographers of Kyrgyzstan: www.photo.in.kg
18. Travel Document Systems (TDS): www.traveldocs.com/kg (information about visas and formalities)
19. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Kyrgyzstan: www.undp.kg
20. Virtual Tourist – country information: <http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/Asia/Kyrgyzstan/TravelGuide-Kyrgyzstan.html>