



**FRIENDLY PEOPLE, UNSPOILT NATURE  
AND PRISTINE MOUNTAIN**

## **DESTINATION KYRGYZSTAN**

by **Christine Richter**

**B**efore leaving for Kyrgyzstan, together with a few journalists from Europe and Canada, at the invitation of TOURISM DESTINATION MARKETING FOR THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC (DMO) I didn't know much about this Central Asian country, bordered on the North by Kazakhstan, on the east by China, on the south by China and Tajikistan and on the west by Uzbekistan. All I knew was that the Russian Empire annexed Kyrgyzstan in the late 1800's. It achieved its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, and is going through a transition struggling against poverty and corruption. The revolution in March 2005 caught media attention and «put the country on the map», so to speak. Since then, several countries have issued travel warnings, a development which has seriously impacted

the emerging tourism sector.

The main purpose of our invitation was to see with our own eyes what the country has to offer and how safe travelling is. We learnt from the international organisations established in Kyrgyzstan, particularly from the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) and from the locals that four days after the revolution everything was back to normal and that the country affords safe-travel as any European destination. International observers consider that there exist in the country now basic conditions to a

smooth and peaceful transition towards a genuine climate of social and economic reforms.

From all the countries I have visited, Kyrgyzstan is certainly one that cannot be compared to any of the others. Its untouched nature, natural beauty, lovely lakes, streams and rivers, alpine meadows, green valleys, dramatic scenery dominated by the Tien Shan Mountains definitely deserve to be highlighted, but are nothing in comparison with the outstanding warm welcome and friendly Kyrgyz people. It's a country where hospitality and friendliness are no empty words, they have retained their true original meaning and you can feel their depth wherever you go and meet people of all age groups. You are not treated as a foreigner or a customer but as a guest and a friend and this makes a world of difference. People haven't been spoilt by western thinking in terms of money and profit. The long traditions, the nomadic life and the influence of the Silk Road can provide an explanation.

As it is a vast mountainous area, Kyrgyzstan has been nicknamed the 'Switzerland of Asia' and just like Switzerland it is a peaceful country where you feel immediately at ease.

Kyrgyzstan is really blessed with a wide range and variety of sites and experiences a





traveller can discover. It is a country for all those who prefer spectacular scenery, unspoilt natural environment, traditions and culture, direct contact with the local population and who have kept the 'adventure/explorer' touch in their minds and souls open to new experiences, accepting

most impressive and colourful with its appealing displays of tasty fruits and vegetables and various food stuffs representing the different ethnic communities, flowers, teas, herbs and spices, dried pasta, handicraft, clothes, kitchen utensils etc...chatting and smiling market stall vendors who love to be photographed.



and respecting the different customs, traditions, people and nature.

The country is not recommended to the average mass tourist and the inexperienced traveller.

## **BISHKEK, the capital**

Bishkek is one of the greenest capitals of Asia and one of the youngest cities in Central Asia. Its history goes back to 1825. The city has nothing really outstanding to offer, except the omnipresent panorama of the snow-covered Tien Shan Mountains. However, the visitor will enjoy the numerous parks and squares, large avenues bordered with trees, Soviet style architecture, museums, theatres, street cafes, bazaars and a relaxing atmosphere. Heavy traffic at certain hours of the day, is one of the first signs of a visible change. Most vehicles are second-hand cars from Western Europe, mainly Germany. Since 2001 Bishkek has its first international 5-star hotel: The HYATT REGENCY and a golf course was recently opened.

The ZUM department store is a leftover from the Soviet era. Here you can find on several floors all kinds of products on several floors. However, the OSH Bazaar is

Statues and buildings illustrate the history of Kyrgyzstan. Thus, Lenin stands still on the Ala Too Square and the building which hosts the American University of Central Asia still has a relief on the top with the hammer and sickel. The statue of Manas, Kyrgyzstan's hero, watches over the city and the future of Kyrgyzstan, whilst its epic poem with over 500,000 lines (longer than the ('Iliad') remains very much alive in the memory of the Kyrgyz people.

## **Ala Archa National Park**

The Ala Archa National Park (about 40 minutes from Bishkek) stretches for 18 kilometres along the river of the same name. Snow-capped peaks, steep forested slopes, lined-up with juniper, fir and birch trees, picturesque water meadows and the fast-flowing noisy Ala Archa river make the park a paradise for hiking, trekking mountaineering and nature lovers and this, just 40 minutes by car from Bishkek. Over 800 species of fauna and flora and some 170 animals can be observed here.

Near the park entrance, there is a small museum dedicated to the regional fauna.

## **The SILK ROAD**

Ancient traders used not just one but several Silk Roads. Silk was the main luxury item they carried along with other goods such as spices, jewellery, gems. In Kyrgyzstan, three branches of the Silk Road have been identified. One northern route coming from China and down to Kazakh-



stan passing the Lake Issyk-Kul and along the river Chui. Another climbed up the Torugart Pass and continued through central Kyrgyzstan via Naryn and the Chui Valley. The third southern route crossed the Irkeshtan pass and went to Osh, the city – 3,000 years old in 2000 – was the birthplace of Babar, the founder of the Moghul dynasty

The main relicts of the Great Silk Road passing through Kyrgyzstan are the Tash Rabat caravanserai and the Burana Tower. The latter is all what remains of the capital of the mighty state of Karahanid, Balasagun, once an important centre on the Silk Road. The tower, originally 45 meters high, is now only 25 meters high as an earthquake destroyed the top. On the site, there is also a small museum and a collection of gravestones (called 'balbal') from the 5th-6th century BCE as well as some rock paintings. Thousands of rock paintings (petroglyphs) can be seen in the Open Air Museum of Cholpon Ata at the Issyk-Kul lake. Most of them date back to the 5th-1st century BCE and were made by the Skythian people. The paintings represent deers, wolves, ibex, hunters....

## **LAKE ISSYK-KUL AND UNESCO BIOSPHERE RESERVE**

Issyk-Kul is the second largest high altitude Lake (1,607 m altitude, 180 km long and 70 km wide). As its name indicates ('hot' lake), it is never frozen.





Since 2001 the Lac Issyk-Kul is a part of the Issyk-Kul Biosphere (UNESCO site), extending over an area almost twice the size of Switzerland. The German Government has supported its establishment.

The Issyk-Kul region offers an interesting flora and fauna. The Marco Polo sheep, the Siberian Ibex and the snow leopard can still be found here.

Tourism plays an important economic role, especially around the lake. Many of the villages of the northern side of the lake were well-known holiday destinations during the Soviet era. Cholpon Ata is one of those «retro» Soviet beach resorts with its 'sanatoriums' (typical Soviet style holiday resort where, besides enjoying leisure activities, you can also benefit from various kinds of medical treatments, e.g. the Aurora Sanatorium sited in a beautiful park).

Meanwhile new hotels and resorts have been built (e.g. Raduga Hotel) or are under construction. Some locals offer room and board for a small amount of money.

For the time being, the lake is still a paradise with sandy beaches, crystal clear water with a temperature of 24 degrees Celsius in summer. Its salty water possesses a medicinal power which peaks at sunrise.

## KYRGYZ TRADITIONS

Here, most traditions and customs are deeply rooted in the nomadic way of life of the Kyrgyz people.

## Jailoo- summer pasture

The mountain villages of Kyrgyzstan have managed to preserve their traditions and nomadic culture. In summer the Kyrgyz move to the jailoo (2,500-3,000 meter altitude) with their sheep and horses and where they live in yurts.

A stay at a jailoo really immerses the visitor in a natural environment where they will experience the joys of a nomadic lifestyle that has remained unchanged for centuries. 'Jailoo trips' can be organised by the Kyrgyz Community-based Tourism Association.

## Yurt

The Yurt, the traditional Kyrgyz home featuring the Kyrgyz flag, is composed of a wooden structure and several layers of felt covers. To assemble a yurt takes at least one hour. The most important part of the yurt is the shamrak, the whole, at the top allowing for temperature control and stove smoke evacuation. The floor is covered with coloured or natural shyrdaks (carpets). Colourful tapestries hang on the walls and in the evening colourful blankets serve to create a comfortable sleeping space. It is customary for a girl wishing to get married to own 40 such blankets.

## Kyrgyz felt carpets

Traditionally, they have been used to decorate the yurt. The art of making the-

se carpets is still widely practised, with each region having its own style and decorative ornaments. We had the chance to compare felt production of the Naryn Region (at Kochkor) and Issyk-Kul (at Tamchy).

The Ala Kiyiz carpets are made of natural plain or coloured unspun wool. The wool is placed on a mat, then covered with a cloth, tightly rolled and tied up, before hot water being poured over it. This mat is then trampled for several hours. Through this process, the wool melds together and the outcome is a unique carpet.

The Shyrdak carpets and covers are also made of loose wool pressed into sheets of felt, dyed in different colours and quilted according to a specific technique.

## Hunting with Eagles

Hunting with the Golden Eagle is an ancient tradition. We watched a demonstration of this ancient practice in the beautiful valley of Grigorivivskoye near Lake Issyk-Kul. Only a few people master this technique nowadays as it requires several years of training, a lot of patience and much mutual trust between hunter and eagle. The hunting season with eagles stretches from October to February during which a skilled eagle can catch 50-60 foxes, a dozen badgers, a couple of lynxes and 4-5 wolves.

## Kyrgyz cuisine

Kyrgyz cuisine reflects influences from neighbouring countries, various ethnic communities and the Silkroad. Owing to the nomadic way of life, meat and dairy products feature heavily in most meals.

Specialities of Kyrgyzstan include Besh-Barmak (meat with home-made noodles), Plov (rice, carrots onions and ham), Manti (steamed dumplings filled with ham meat and onions), Shashlik, Lagman (thick home-made noodles in a spicy sauce with vegetables), Shorpo (soup with potatoes, vegetables and big hunk of lam meat with the bone) and as drinks Kumyss, fermented mare's milk and Maksym, a beverage made of barley, wheat or corn.