



Kyrgyzstan: Information Pack



Hello team!

Epic is super excited to welcome you to Kyrgyzstan!

You're about to visit one of the most under-explored and magical countries in the world; one inhabited by nomadic horsemen, a vast array of landscapes, and uncountable adventures. We don't plan on holding any of this back either and are very excited to show you the wonders of this Central Asian destination.

This information pack is LOADED with everything you need to start preparing yourself for the journey ahead.

Please read this entire document thoroughly as there are many important details to take note of. This information pack will be your primary trip resource and one you can keep circling back to in preparation for this Kyrgyzstan: Discovering the Celestial Mountains Expedition.

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Getting Ready

A few months prior to the trip, we will be sending you a Google form to fill out and return in order to collect the necessary information from you. Please do your best to fill in and return these in a timely manner when prompted.

Visa Arrangements

- All guests coming on this Kyrgyzstan trip MUST confirm their country's visa agreement with Kyrgyzstan well in advance of the start of the tour.
- Visa fees are NOT included in the tour price and it is your responsibility to obtain the correct visa in a timely manner from Kyrgyz Immigration if needed.
- MOST nationalities including USA, UK, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, etc are able to visit Kyrgyzstan without a visa or can obtain a visa upon arrival (VOA). Be sure to check the [official immigration website](#) to see if your nationality qualifies.
- NOT EVERY COUNTRY can receive a visa upon arrival. As such, it is a good idea to double-check.

If you do not qualify for a visa upon arrival, then you will need to visit the nearest Kyrgyz embassy to apply for one in person. [Follow this link](#) to find the one nearest you.

DOCUMENTS TO SUBMIT TO EPIC

- This is for our records and/or in case of an emergency.

Spending Extra Time in Kyrgyzstan

Have extra time? You can choose to stay in Kyrgyzstan either before or after the tour begins.

Team members often ask us where they should visit in Kyrgyzstan if they have extra time. There are many options; here are a few suggestions of places we like should you have extra time in the country:

- **Ala-Archa:** Those who have a few extra days in Bishkek should definitely look into spending some time in the nearby national park of Ala-Archa. It is very close to the capital and offers some of the most accessible alpine scenery in the country. For those who need extra time to acclimate/get their feet under them, this is a great place to do so.
- **Almaty:** Almaty is the largest city in Kazakhstan and is generally considered the most cosmopolitan/bustling metropolis in Central Asia. It is only 3-4 hours away from Bishkek by private transfer, which makes it an easy add-on to our itinerary. For those with the time, there are several interesting locations nearby Almaty as well, like Kaindy Lake or Altyn Emel National Park. Some people choose to fly into Almaty instead of Bishkek as well - there are more international flights going to Almaty and are sometimes cheaper as well.
- **Osh/Southern Kyrgyzstan:** We only suggest this part of Kyrgyzstan to those with lots of extra time. Osh, which is the largest city in Southern Kyrgyzstan, is an interesting city to visit; far more traditional and raw than Bishkek with a long history and a love for street food. This part of the country is somewhat isolated as roads are very rough. There are cheap flights on Air Manas from Bishkek to Osh that leave several times per day.

LAND BORDERS

- Guests can enter/leave Kyrgyzstan overland relatively easily to/from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- Kazakhstan is the easiest border to cross to and from Kyrgyzstan. [Kazakh visas](#) are relatively easy to obtain.
- Note that China, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all require special visas to enter. For most nationalities, you will need to organize these visas beforehand. You'll need to check with each respective immigration page for current visa procedures for these countries. Be sure to check the number of entries each visa allows - if you have a single-entry visa for any of these countries and leave said country, you will not be able to re-enter on the same visa.
 - [Uzbekistan immigration](#)
 - [Tajikistan immigration](#)
 - [China immigration](#)

Flights to Kyrgyzstan

Arrival Airport: Bishkek (FRU) - **Departure Airport:** Bishkek (FRU)

- Bishkek (the capital of Kyrgyzstan) is the largest city in Kyrgyzstan and one of the most important in Central Asia. Yet, there are only a few airlines that service the city reliably. Bishkek's main airport, Manas International (FRU), is very small considering it's the busiest in the country. Most guests, especially those flying from the USA, will have multiple layovers/connections when traveling to Bishkek.
- Delays do happen when you are traveling long distances via various connecting flights.
- Because of this fact, we advise that you arrive in Kyrgyzstan one day before the trip starts. That way you can be sure to both arrive into the country on time and get a good night's rest before we start the tour.

Note: Included accommodation does not start until the evening of day 1. If you arrive in Kyrgyzstan in the days before the tour starts, you will need to pay for your own accommodation. We can help make hotel suggestions for you if you'd like.

AIRLINES

- Check the visa conditions of any country you plan to transit through, you may be required to have a transit visa. India and China are good examples of this.
- Please begin looking at flights now, this will allow you to get an overview of prices, routes, and possible connections. Keep an eye out for promo fares, particularly with low-cost carriers.
- Some may choose to fly into Almaty as it is a larger city and it's international airport is serviced by many more international carriers.

CONNECTIONS

- If you are traveling from Europe, you will most likely connect to Bishkek via Istanbul.
- Pegasus Airlines and Aeroflot are two low-cost carriers that offer direct flights to Bishkek from Istanbul and Moscow respectively. Note that Pegasus Airlines flights depart from Sabiha Gokcen Airport (SAW), which is a 1-hour drive from Istanbul city center and 2 hours from Istanbul International.
- If you're flying from Australia or Southeast Asia, you will most likely need to connect in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Dubai is another possibility, albeit more expensive.
- Southern Air China offers direct flights from Urumqi to Bishkek, though we discourage people from traveling through China at the moment due to strange airline policies and biological quarantines.

- We recommend checking Skyscanner, Secret Flying, and Kiwi for flights. Skiplagged may also be useful.

When do you need to be in Bishkek?

- To experience the full itinerary, you need to be in the hotel/meeting place and be rested by the morning of day 1. We will confirm the exact time and meeting place just prior to the start of the tour.
- The tour ends on day 14 and with the exception of breakfast and airport transfers, no services are included this day, so it makes sense to try and leave by the evening.
- Checkout from the hotel is around 11 am

Accommodation in Kyrgyzstan

We offer a variety of unique and comfortable accommodation options on this trip. From hotels and guesthouses to traditional yurts and nice tents; we do our best to make sure where we sleep is part of the overall tour experience.

It is important to discuss the significance of yurts in Kyrgyz culture and what it will be like staying in them. Yurts are large temporary structures built from felt and wood or metal support beams. They are always circular in shape and sort of resemble large tents or a small pavilion.

Yurts are extremely important to Kyrgyz society. They are believed to have been used by Central Asian nomads for over 3000 years and were crucial to their lifestyle and prosperity. To this day, yurts are still a cornerstone of nomadic lifestyle and are used regularly, especially in the summer when many Kyrgyz families escape to the high pasturelands (jailoos).

Yurts range in size but generally accommodate 3-6 people. Most of them are equipped with a coal-burning stove that is lit at night to keep guests very toasty at night; smoke is vented outside the tent. (Please let us know beforehand if you are opposed to coal being used in your yurt.)

Here is a brief rundown of what kind of accommodation to expect in each location:

- **Song Kul:** Traditional yurts located on the south shore of the lake. Surprisingly spacious but still quite cozy. Bathroom located on site.
- **Issyk Kul:** More comfortable yurts located right on the shores of Issyk Kul. Beach access. Showers are reliable.
- **Karakol Valley and Ala-Kul:** Camping. Epic provides tents. Guests will need to bring their own sleeping gear. Mess tent will be present for dinners and socializing. No showers present but very cold alpine lakes and rivers will be plentiful.
- **Altyn Arashan:** Yurts or log cabins. Dinner indoors at a local guesthouse. Guests will be able to bathe in local saunas or hot springs, which we highly recommend doing.
- **Karakol:** A local guesthouse in Karakol. Charming and quaint.
- **Sary Jaz:** Traditional camping again. There will be more hot springs near Enylcheck.
- **Chong-Kemin:** Very nice log cabins with full amenities.
- **Bishkek:** We will be staying in the Plaza Hotel on our last night in Kyrgyzstan. It will be quite the treat :)

Food in Kyrgyzstan

- Food in Kyrgyzstan can vary greatly depending on where we are. In Bishkek, there will be a respectable diversity -- international restaurants are plentiful and are of a high quality.
- In the more remote parts of the country, cooking is more traditional. Classic Kyrgyz cuisine is very filling -- there will be a lot of bread, dairy, soups, and red meat. Spicing is simple. Vegetables are generally hearty and include potatoes, dark greens, and roots.
- Kyrgyz people love to offer sweets and jams at the end of every meal. Kumis (fermented mare's milk) may also be offered. It is a very strange drink and we encourage going outside comfort zones to try it. Hosts will not be offended if you say no.
- Food whilst camping will be the best possible quality, but please have realistic expectations of what our camp cooks can deliver. On some occasions, especially when trekking to Ala-Kul, we may have special opportunities: some entrepreneurial locals pack wine and vodka up to the high camps and sell them (for reasonable prices).

DAILY MEALS :

This is a list of what you can expect from our Kyrgyz hosts:

- **Breakfast:** fried eggs, porridge, jam, sweets, bread, cheese, milk, tea, coffee
- **Hotel/Yurt Stay Lunch:** Soup course, rice, veggies, meat, some sort of salad, pasta, tea.
- **Trekking Lunch:** usually an array of finger foods e.g. cheeses, charcuteries, canned fish, bread, sandwiches, salads, more sweets.
- **Dinner:** larger meals, rice, stews, grilled meats, bread, salads, sweets

Please let us know early on if you have any diet restrictions/preferences. If you are vegetarian/vegan, you might want to consider bringing some of your own food (for snacks/breakfast stuff), as it can be very difficult to cater to individuals in a big group, though we always do our best.

This adventure tour requires a lot of energy output each day and a big part of our job is keeping everybody well-nourished, happy, and energized.

PERSONAL SNACKS ON THIS TRIP

If you have done some hiking or group travel before, then you know how important snacks are! While Epic does provide some snacks, it is always a great idea to bring some of your favorite trekking/travel snacks from your home country.

- It is possible to find snacks on the road in Kyrgyzstan that are similar to those one might find in the Western world. But it is important that we respect the schedule -- we cannot stop for snacks too often. We suggest bringing your favorite assortment of snacks and chow down during long bus rides and trail breaks. Nuts, jerky, energy gels, Cliff bars, dark chocolate, superfood powder, bliss balls... These are all solid snack foods.
- Choose high calorie, low weight snack foods.
- In Kyrgyzstan, you can find things like cookies/biscuits, juice boxes, soda, crackers, milk chocolate (will melt in your bag), chips, dried fruits/nuts pretty much everywhere you go. Contemporary snack food (power bars, healthy snacks, etc) is a bit harder to find.

Staying Safe on This Tour

- You may have guessed, this adventure tour carries a certain amount of risk since we are traveling and trekking DEEP into the mountains in a developing country. This is not your average holiday per se.

- Guest Safety is Epic's #1 priority and our experienced ground team does everything within their power to set our group up for a safe adventure.
- The name of the game is security and safety first and injury prevention.
- In case of emergency, your Epic trip leader is equipped with a satellite communication device, which can contact outside emergency first responders from any place in Kyrgyzstan.

Horse Riding in Kyrgyzstan

- Horse culture in Kyrgyzstan is one of the aspects of the country that makes it so fascinating. Nomadic herders have been pasturing their animals on the Kyrgyz step for millennia — a practice that is still very much alive and well today.
- On the first day of our trek in the Celestial Mountains, we'll ride horses deeper into the valley to see Karakol Peak (5281 meters). No prior experience riding horses is required. In general, the horses are docile and used to being ridden by people often. Don't worry, we won't turn you out on some wild stallion!

Travel Insurance for Kyrgyzstan

Travel insurance is mandatory for all participants to have. You will need to prove you have insurance by providing a photocopy of your policy.

- If you want the best protection in case of a need for helicopter rescue, the important policy to take out is a [Global Rescue Membership](#). If you don't want to go with Global Rescue for medical travel insurance, that's fine - as that is a separate policy. The membership is only for heli insurance as is not medical insurance.
- There are lots of insurance companies on the market - we recommend that you use [World Nomads](#) or [Safety Wing](#) - they specialize in covering travel to unusual destinations and cover travel to Iran (but do not cover all nationalities).
- Make sure the insurance company chosen provides coverage for activities like trekking up to 4,000 meters and offers helicopter rescue coverage.

Medical Consideration

General Information on health considerations while traveling in Kyrgyzstan:

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/KYRGYZSTAN>

Money In Kyrgyzstan

The official currency of Kyrgyzstan is the Kyrgyz Som.

ATMs are common in the larger urban areas, like Bishkek, Kochkor, and Karakol but less common in-between. We also recommend that you bring a bit of foreign currency like USD, Euro, or GBP Outside of Bishkek, though credit cards often work here as well.

As to how much money you should bring, here are some costs for you to take into account...

- Souvenirs vary in price from a couple of dollars up to much more expensive, depending on what you are buying and how good you are at haggling.
- Soft drinks and water are about \$1-2.
- A meal will set you back between \$3 - \$12.

MONEY RECOMMENDATION

If you take out the equivalent of 300 USD in Kyrgyz soms, you should have more than enough to get souvenirs, buy meals, buy drinks, etc.

Please see the note on tipping in the next section of this document. When we return to Bishkek at the end of the tour, you will have a chance to get out more cash should you need (for shopping, tipping staff, last minute purchases, etc).

Tipping Staff and Porters

Epic staff including our ground team in Kyrgyzstan go above and beyond for guests before, during, and after the trip to make sure that everyone has the best possible trekking experience imaginable. So how do you show your guides some love? Well, besides bringing coffee, tipping is the next best option.

Note: Tipping should reflect your overall experience with our staff. No guest is required to tip, however we have received many questions regarding tipping in the past which is why we include this info in this information pack. Below we have included the industry standard recommendation to offer our staff some additional compensation based on your overall experience and keeping in mind the length of the trip. Show your staff some love!

TIPPING RECOMMENDATIONS (IN USD):

- Lead Epic Guide: \$100-150 per guest
- Kyrgyz Guide: \$100-150 per guest
- Driver: \$30-50 per guest
- Porter Team for Ala Kul: \$40-50 per guest
- Jeep Drivers for Sary Jaz: \$10 per guest

SIM Cards and Internet Access in Kyrgyzstan

- Foreigners can easily obtain SIM cards in Kyrgyzstan.
- Coverage in Kyrgyzstan varies. Cell Phone receptions will regularly drop when we are outside the major cities i.e Song Kul, Sary Jaz. Reception at Ala-Kul will be next to none.
- There are several major networks in Kyrgyzstan: Beeline, MegaCom, and O!
- You will need your passport in order to get a SIM.
- Keep in mind that this trip is a chance for our guests to unplug and fully embrace a proper digital detox.
- The internet situation in Kyrgyzstan is spotty at best, so please have realistic expectations regarding wifi and internet speeds/access.

Meeting the People & Being Culturally Sensitive

Compared to its more conservative neighbors, Kyrgyzstan is a remarkably tolerant place. Locals freely express their opinions on topics as varied as religion to foreign relations, usually casually over a cup of tea or glass of vodka.

Kyrgyz people are extremely welcoming and hospitable, which is customary of the nomadic lifestyle. Guests are treated with reverence, warmth, and lots of food. Respect is given to us and respect is expected in return. It is our responsibility as travelers to make sure that we pay our own respects and to leave a positive impact.

Here are some things to consider when interacting with local people:

- The official religion of Kyrgyzstan is Islam. The North is not as conservative as the South - in fact, it is quite secular - but that doesn't mean that some people still don't adhere in some way to the faith.
- By many standards, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most westernized countries in Central Asia. Dress codes are loose and genders frequently mingle. Avoid wearing anything too revealing as this will attract unwanted attention. We will not visit any mosques so special dress for these will not be required.
- Kyrgyzstan is becoming an increasingly equal society. Women are not as marginalized or as cloistered here as in some other Muslim countries. Please feel free to interact with the local women, regardless of your own gender.
- A good strong handshake and eye contact between men is the surest way to show respect. Handshakes are usually done with the right hand. Some Kyrgyz men use the left hand as well and fully clasp yours. The position of the left hand on the arm indicates the level of respect being shown - the closer their left hand is to yours, the more comfortable they are with you. Some may also bring their right hand to their heart afterward as an added gesture.
- In general, Kyrgyz people do not shy away from drinking, and shots of vodka are sometimes offered to guests. If you abstain, it is acceptable to say no. If you accept, it is customary to drink when there's a toast and to finish the entire drink in one go.

About the Guides

- Each tour group is accompanied by one Western trip leader and one local guide.
- As well as the western trip leader, we have a Kyrgyz ground team. Note that aside from our guides, other support team members may or may not speak English well.
- For more information on our guides, check out our [meet the team](#) page on our website

Weather Conditions in Kyrgyzstan

The weather in Kyrgyzstan can be EXTREMELY variable. While it may be bright and sunny in the capital, it could be snowing in the mountains. Lower elevations are generally hotter and drier; snow is common at any time of the year in the mountains, even summer. A storm can happen at any time.

- **Bishkek** - Hot and dry in the summer. Afternoon thunderstorms are common. Average temperatures: High: 35°C / 95° F Low: 24°C / 76° F.
- **Song Kul** - Brisk in the morning, warm during the day, potentially stormy at night, cold at night. A true alpine climate. High: 23°C / 73.4° F Low: 10°C / 50° F.
- **Issyk Kul/Karakol** - Probably the hottest place we will visit in Kyrgyzstan besides Bishkek. Lake itself can be quite chilly. Less prone to afternoon storms as nearby mountains generally attract clouds. High: 23°C / 73.4° F Low: 10°C / 50° F.
- **Ala-Kul** - Probably the coldest place that we will visit on the trip. Snowfields may still be present on trail even in August. Snow is also a possibility. High: 23°C / 73.4° F Low: 10°C / 50° F.
- **Chong-Kemin** - Very pleasant. Cooler than Bishkek but not as cold as Song Kul or as warm as Issyk Kul. High: 23°C / 73.4° F Low: 10°C / 50° F.

What To Pack for Kyrgyzstan

It's extremely important that you bring the right gear for the trip. In case of emergency, there are outdoor shops in Bishkek but buying equipment at the last second will be inconvenient and costly. Prices for outdoor gear in Kyrgyzstan are no less than those in Europe or the USA.

The weather will at times be cold and, especially whilst we are close to 4,000 meters. You will want to be comfortable so it's worth spending money on decent quality warm gear. Though likewise it can be very sunny, pleasant and comfortable at lower elevations. It is always best to be prepared for a variety of climates and temperature fluctuations.

Though porters will be available for the Ala-Kul trek, they cannot carry everything - weight limits are imposed by a local porter's union and we want to respect those limits. We hire a certain number of porters for the trek to carry group gear but, if for some reason, the porter team is not able to accommodate all of the guest's items, the guest in question will need to reassess and/or be responsible for hiring an additional porter. Your guide can give advice on what to pack before the trek begins.

PACKS & BAGGAGE

- Expedition Duffle Bag
- Day Trekking Backpack with rain cover

ESSENTIAL PERSONAL GEAR

- 0F \ -17C Sleeping Bag
- Inflating Sleeping Pad
- Inflatable Camp Pillow

SPECIALTY EQUIPMENT

- Trekking Poles
- Headlamp
- Grayl Filter Bottle
- Gaiters (optional)
- 1L Nalgene bottle

BOOTS & FOOTWEAR

- Trekking boots/trail runners
- Sandals/Tevas/Keens

OTHER PERSONAL GEAR

- Dry Bags
- Sunglasses
- Personal First Aid Kit
- Power Bank
- Chargers/Phone Cable
- Snacks

TOILETRIES

- Toothbrush, Toothpaste
- Biodegradable Soap
- Deodorant
- Sunscreen
- Fast Drying Microfiber Travel Towel

CLOTHING LAYER SYSTEMS

- Down Jacket
- Hard Shell/Rain Jacket
- Fleece
- 2-3 Hiking T-shirt
- 2 Lightweight trekking Pants
- 3-4 Merinos Trekking Socks
- 1 Base layer Bottom
- 1 Base layer Top
- Hat for sun protection
- Beanie
- Buff and Bandana
- Gloves LightWeight
- Underwear / Bras
- Swimsuit

Recommended reading on Kyrgyzstan

If you want to do some reading about the country before you visit here is a list of our favorites:

- **The Great Game:** A historical novel written in the style of an espionage thriller. Explores the proxy wars and shadowy acts of the Russian Empire and the British Empire as they expand into Central Asia in the 19th century. Extremely informative and very well told. A great book for anyone looking for more context on one of the world's most unknown regions.
- **Life at the Edge of the Empire:** Oral Histories of Soviet Kyrgyzstan: The 35 oral histories in this English-language anthology touch on events including: Urkun; World War I; sedentarization; collectivization; World War II; the post-war reconstruction period; Stalin's death; the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras; independence; and privatization.
- **Jamila:** The Second World War is at its peak, and Jamilia's husband is off fighting at the front. Accompanied by Daniyar, a sullen newcomer who was wounded on the battlefield, Jamilia spends her days hauling sacks of grain from the threshing floor to the train station in their village in the Caucasus. Spurning men's advances and wincing at the dispassionate letters she receives from her husband, Jamilia falls helplessly in love with the mysterious Daniyar in this heartbreakingly epic tale.
- **Manas:** Lost and Found: Rural Kyrgyz, far from the Judeo-Christian world, has many striking biblical traditions. A comparative analysis of Kyrgyzstan's national epic Manas and Hebrew scripture reinforces the bond.
- **The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years:** Set in the vast windswept Central Asian steppes and the infinite reaches of galactic space, this powerful novel offers a vivid view of the culture and values of the Soviet Union's Central Asian peoples.
- **Inside Central Asia:** A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran: In this comprehensive new treatment, renowned political writer and historian Dilip Hiro places the politics, peoples, and cultural background of this critical region firmly into the context of current international focus.
- **The Silk Roads:** Far more than a history book of the Silk Roads, this is truly a revelatory new history of the world, promising to destabilize notions of where we come from and where we are headed next.
- **Restless Valley:** Revolution, Murder, and Intrigue in the Heart of Central Asia: A illuminating novel that brings attention to post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan's growing pains. Conflicts with neighboring Uzbekistan, insurgents and drug traffickers from Afghanistan, and plenty of internal strife. A great look at modern Kyrgyzstan and what has been through.

Early client departure protocol

In the event that a trip participant needs to leave the planned trip itinerary early due to illness, injury, family emergency, personal reasons, or simply because they want to, etc then there are a few things to note:

Should a trip participant choose to leave the planned itinerary early for any reason, from the moment they leave the tour, all expenses from that point onwards are the responsibility of the trip participant and no amount of the tour will be refunded.

This includes, but is not limited to, hotels/accommodation, transportation, emergency helicopter evacuation, , meals, airport transfer, guide services - everything that is normally covered by Epic during your tour is no longer covered once a trip participant decides to leave.

That said, in an emergency situation or in case of severe illness, Epic staff will do everything within our means to aid the trip participant until they are in a safe/stable condition. When possible, Epic staff can also help you book new accommodation, flights, transport, etc when possible - but all of these expenses are for the trip participant to pay.

Point being, our staff will always be available to the best of our ability to facilitate the logistics of your departure, should you choose to leave the trip early.

Liability waiver

All tour participants will be required to sign an industry-standard waiver. Waivers are usually issued on day 1 of the tour at our first team briefing. If you would like to request a copy of the waiver in advance, please email us.

Paying the balance

- Final balance payments will be due approximately 3 months before the tour begins. If you have a balance owing we will advise you when the time comes to pay.
- Please remember that deposits are non-refundable (refundable in case of trip cancellation)
- If you are unable to attend this adventure please inform Epic as soon as possible.
- If you would like to pay the balance sooner, please email us at contact@epicexpeditions.com.

Again, we are very excited to get to meet you in person soon!

The Epic Team

