



Spend Less, Travel More in

Kyrgyzstan & Kazakhstan

ULTIMATE 3 WEEK ITINERARY, FOOD, ACCOMMODATION,
ACTIVITIES, FULL BUDGET BREAKDOWN AND MUCH MORE

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THE GUIDE



Who are we?

We are a British (Jordan) and Irish (Chrisy) couple, currently based in the UK. We met while travelling 13 years ago in Bolivia, and have been travelling alongside our day jobs ever since, squeezing our budget and time to get the most out of our annual leave. We're passionate about getting great value trips and self-guiding our own adventures.

Find us:

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How to use this guide

- This guide is based on our own experiences and we aim to keep it as up-to-date as possible.
- Prices are correct as of August 2025 and are subject to change. Any costs are listed in GBP as we are from the UK.
- Anything underlined is a direct link to the relevant source/website
- **"Choose your own adventure"** sections detail alternative things to see or do, if you have the time or want to swap them out for something in our itinerary.
- We would love to hear your feedback via our socials - this guide and our other resources are FREE, but if you found them helpful, you can [buy us a coffee here](#).



Disclaimer - this guide contains affiliate links, which means we receive a commission if you decide to book/purchase via the link, at no extra cost to you. We will only ever recommend services, tours and operators that we have personally used and consider good value.

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The “stans” weren't really on my radar, until Chrisy started not-so-subtly sending me videos of horse riding in Kyrgyzstan. It didn't take much convincing and before long, we had settled on visiting both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for our honeymoon (we're definitely not “lie on the beach” kind of people). It was certainly an adventure as there isn't a great deal of information about Central Asia online and we found our usual trusty guidebooks to be pretty outdated, so we've put together this guide to help you plan your trip to these wonderful countries.



Do I need to speak the language?

I'm guilty of trying to learn a little on a language app and giving up the moment I see a non-roman alphabet. However, although I am (embarrassingly) not even close to fluent in any language other than English, I do think it's only polite to try a little. While Google translate can be your best friend here, even a stilted “please” or “thank you” in the local language goes a long way.

I think feeling and enthusiasm really helps - even if you don't understand each others' words, your actions and expressions can tell a huge story.

The main languages used are Kyrgyz and Russian in Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakh and Russian in Kazakhstan. We did find English more widely spoken in the big cities but hardly at all in the more rural areas. However, many of the locals were happy to communicate through **Google Translate**. Ensure to download the relevant languages so you can use it offline when needed.



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NAVIGATION - USEFUL APPS

To be honest, we mostly relied on information from locals or our accommodation hosts - such as finding out where and when to get a marshutkra (local mini-buses). They don't seem to stick strictly to timetables anyway! But there are a few navigation apps that can be useful:

- **Google maps** - my go to for navigation but was a bit unreliable here, and certainly not reliable for public transport here.
- **Yandex Go** - while this is primarily a ride-hailing app (Uber of the 'stans), there is a mapping function which proved useful.
- **2GIS** - we were told a few times about this app, which is more accurate in Central Asia, particularly for public transport, but there seems to be issues downloading it on IOS in certain countries. Try with Android or with a VPN.
- **Maps.Me** - an old faithful, it has downloadable offline GPS maps - useful when you have no mobile service (but only if you have downloaded the relevant map in advance).

CASH OR CARD?



Public transport and many small restaurants will only accept cash. In the cities, debit/credit card is widely accepted. We also found that many accommodation sites would only accept cash, so check in advance if you need to withdraw/change money before travelling to the more rural areas. There are many banks and ATMs in Bishkek, Karakol and Almaty. It was easy to exchange USD, GBP and Euro for an almost perfect rate in local banks. The local currencies are Kyrgyz Som and Kazakh Tenge.

E-SIM



Mobile data is extremely helpful. The signal is generally very good in the larger towns and cities, but virtually non-existent in the mountains, and in Kyzart village. We had wifi access in hotels and many cafes/restaurants. For data, we use an e-sim from [Airalo](#) - use discount code **JORDAN2245** to get yours.

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GETTING THERE (FROM THE UK)

We actually broke one of our money-saving rules for this trip - flexibility! Because this was our honeymoon (don't be put off - there's no all-inclusive luxury resorts on this trip), we had pretty fixed dates which we needed to travel on, which meant we were limited for flight options. But you can definitely find cheaper options than we did.

There are no direct flights from the UK to Bishkek. The most common route is to fly from the UK via Istanbul to Bishkek. There are low cost options with Pegasus - we've never flown with them but the vibe I was getting was Turkish Ryanair - the base flight price may be low, but by the time you add luggage etc, it might not be the bargain you thought. We flew with Turkish Airlines for this leg, and were very impressed - full meal service was included on each 4 hour flight.

We returned from Almaty - we flew with Qatar via Doha, but there are other airlines flying via Istanbul or other routes. Air Astana does also have direct flights to London 2-3 times a week.



WHEN TO VISIT

To follow our itinerary, you should visit in **summer** (July and August are best). Many hiking/horse riding trails will be impassable from mid-September onwards.

We visited in August - it was very hot in Bishkek (30'C+) and mid 20s (celsius) in Almaty, but the temperature varied massively depending on the altitude - Song-Kul and Altyn Arashan were very cold at night.

However, if you want to ski during the winter - there are resorts in Karakol and just outside of Almaty. The Song-Kul horseriding trip can be done year round with some operators, but it will be very cold!

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FOOD TIPS

For us, part of the experience of travelling is the food. Local cuisine is part of the cultural experience but it doesn't have to be pricey. Often the best, most authentic food can be found in the cheaper restaurants more geared towards locals. You definitely don't need to eat in the fanciest places to experience great food. Strict vegetarians and vegans may struggle here as we found most dishes meat-heavy.

KYRGYZ HOSPITALITY

We found that most accommodation outside of the cities provided (or had the option) to provide meals, which were plentiful and generally very good value. We found the hospitality to be excellent throughout Kyrgyzstan with meals (including breakfast) often consisting of multiple courses and a selection of bread, fruit, biscuits, other sides and tea.



PRICES

We found that most main meals cost between £2-£7. Restaurants aimed more at tourists such as Navat and Dastorkan (In Karakol) will cost more.

MUST-TRY DISHES

Local food to try:

- **Chak chak** - fried dough dessert with condensed milk
- **Ashlyan-Fu** - cold spicy noodle dish in Karakol - delicious!
- **Plov** - slow cooked meat, rice and vegetables
- **Horse meat** is quite prevalent and considered a real specialty, but you can avoid it if you'd prefer.
- **Kumis** - fermented horse milk - not enjoyable but you should try it once!
- **KVAS** - a yeasty drink, like a cross between beer and Coca-Cola. These were present on little street stalls everywhere in Bishkek.
- **Macadamia nuts** - it sounds odd but honestly the nuts at the markets were sensational!



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FOOD CHAINS

The detailed breakdown of the itinerary will include area-specific food recommendations, but there are several local chains that can be found in different locations throughout Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

NAVAT

There are several branches in Bishkek, Osh, Almaty and Astana. The food is central asian cuisine, but they do have some western options. We ate here both in Bishkek and Almaty, sampling some of the traditional dishes. Chrisy's favourite was Chak Chak, a dessert consisting of fried dough and condensed milk. They also give you complementary Kumis - so this is place to try it if you don't want to pay to try it! The atmosphere was great - with live dancing going on in the Almaty branch while we were there. You may need to wait for a table as it is very popular.



NEDELKA

This is a local chain in Almaty, with many locations across the city. We ate here and stopped in for coffee a few times at different branches. The portions are big, and the food is excellent - many options for breakfast/brunch, as well as huge pizzas and pastas. The coffees were enormous and the cakes were also delicious!



BUBLIK

A chain of coffee shops in Bishkek - very popular with locals. There is a huge coffee scene in Bishkek, with so many to choose from. As we both love specialty coffee, we were never disappointed!



COMMUNITY TOURISM

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM (CBT)



This is a sustainable tourism initiative which connects local communities in remote areas with travellers for homestays, information and tours, keeping tourism locally managed and owned. There are several CBT groups throughout Kyrgyzstan. Those present in areas you may pass through or visit using our itinerary are: Bishkek, Tamchy, Kochkor, Bokonbayevo and Karakol. We utilised CBT in Tamchy and found it to be great value - we can highly recommend. To find out more or get contact details for the relevant group, check [the website](#).



FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

We highly recommend trying to fit your visit around one of the local festivals. We planned our trip around the festival of horse games in Tamchy, and it was amazing! You can find more information and dates of events on the [CBT website](#).



WORLD NOMAD GAMES

The World Nomad Games will be held in Kyrgyzstan from 31st August to 6th September. The competition will showcase the best athletes in world within some of the craziest sports such as horseback wrestling, Kok Boru ("basketball" on horseback using a goat carcass instead of a ball), racing and more. Tickets and information can be found [here](#).

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ALTITUDE SICKNESS

Kyrgyzstan is ranked the 4th most mountainous country in the world, with over 90% of the land consisting of mountain ranges. Song-Kul and Ala-Kul lakes are at altitudes of around 3500m, with the steepest sections of the routes peaking at 4000m. Altitude sickness can take effect in theory at elevations of over 2500m, and can include symptoms ranging from mild to severe headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath, nausea, vomiting. Mild symptoms can be managed with usual remedies such as taking paracetamol for headaches and keeping well hydrated. It is unpredictable as to who is affected by it, so if you have never been exposed to high altitudes, it is worth being prepared.

I have experienced severe altitude sickness (uncontrollable vomiting) in the past and now will take altitude medication and anti-nausea medication for anything over 3000m, which definitely helps. Some of the remedies may be available locally, but I use the Boots online pharmacy service before any trips that will be at high altitude.

Most people will experience a shortness of breath or trouble sleeping at high altitudes, even if they are not unwell. Do not underestimate hiking at these dizzying heights - 10km uphill at altitude is exponentially harder than a 10km walk at sea level.



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KYRGYZ TRANSPORT

TRANSPORT OPTIONS

- **Yandex** - the local ride hailing app (instead of Uber), very reliable.
- **Marshutkra** - these are minibuses that have set routes. They technically have numbers and timetables but in practice the timings are variable. They tend to leave once they are full, and you can wave one down even if it's not at an "official" stop.
- **Shared Taxis** - these are taxi's that use fixed routes, and again leave once they're full.
- **Public bus** - we didn't use any actual buses, but they do run between within Bishkek, from Bishkek to Almaty, and between Bishkek and Karakol.
- **Train** - there are very few trains in Kyrgyzstan. There is a line that operates between Bishkek and Balykchy, but it's possibly slower and costs more than taking a Marshutkra.
- **Car hire**

TAXIS

I am always cautious of just jumping in a taxi, as in many countries they are known to inflate prices for tourists. We primarily used the Yandex app to order a ride, or, in areas where Yandex was unavailable, our accommodation hosts were able to help organise trusted taxis.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT VS CAR HIRE

We opted to use public transport for a number of reasons - firstly, because we were starting our journey in Kyrgyzstan and ending in Kazakhstan, and it would have been expensive and complicated to take a hired car over the border. I also believe that it gives you an insight into how the locals get around, and gives you opportunity to speak with others (ish - with a language barrier). If we had rented a car, we wouldn't have been singing and having vodka shots at 10am in the back of a Marshutkra with the locals! More on that later...



KRYGYZ TRANSPORT

PUBLIC TRANSPORT VS CAR HIRE

Public transport was certainly cheaper than it would have been to rent a car - when researching before the trip, we couldn't really understand why it seemed so expensive to hire a car (a lot more than hiring in the UK) - upwards of £600 for 10 days just for a vehicle, and more for a rooftop tent or any extras. On arrival in Kyrgyzstan, it didn't take long to understand why - many of the roads are poorly maintained or resemble dirt tracks - the hire price reflects the risk of damage on these roads. Many of the travellers we came across had indeed had accidents or break-downs (while they assured us that the local people were very helpful and sorted the issue quickly, it didn't sound ideal). If you're following our itinerary, it is possible to hire a car in Bishkek and drop it off in Karakol for an additional fee, then continue your journey on to Kazakhstan.

In comparison, our Marshutkra or shared taxi journeys usually cost less than £5 for multiple hours of travel. We did take a couple of more pricey private taxis but even with these, we spent less than we would have on car hire overall.

However, hiring a vehicle would give you more flexibility, especially if you wanted to visit areas to the south such as Naryn or Kel-Su lake, which are more difficult (but not impossible) to get to using public transport.

TRANSPORT IN KAZAKHSTAN

In Kazakhstan, due to our route, we didn't use public transport outside of the city of Almaty. It seemed that there is very limited public transport to the lakes and Charyn Canyon, and these are only really accessible by tour, taxi or your own transport. There are buses which you can take to Big Almaty lake or Shymbulak ski resort but we did not try this first-hand. For journeys within the city of Almaty, we used Yandex or walked.

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TRANSPORT SUMMARY

SO WHICH MODES OF TRANSPORT WILL I ACTUALLY NEED?

- Marshutkras (minibuses with set routes)
- Shared taxis
- Yandex (ride-hailing app)
- Private transfer from Karakol to Almaty
- Horses!

KAZAKHSTAN



KYRGYZSTAN

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HORSE RIDING

NOMADIC CULTURE

Horse-riding in Kyrgyzstan is more than just an outdoor adventure - it's a gateway into the country's deeply rooted nomadic heritage. For centuries, horses have been central to Kyrgyz life, shaping everything from daily survival to traditions, storytelling, and identity. Traversing vast alpine meadows and rugged mountain passes on horseback offers a rare chance to experience the land as locals have for generations. It's this authentic connection to both landscape and culture that makes horse-riding not just a highlight, but an essential part of truly understanding Kyrgyzstan.

HOW TO BOOK

There are many local tour operators in Kyrgyzstan offering horse-riding trips in various locations, but we found it quite difficult to find booking information before getting to Kyrgyzstan. We used **Kyrgyz Wow Travel** (formerly Tunduk Travel) and were delighted with their service. We arranged both the Song-kul and Ala-kul/Altyn Arashan horseriding trips with them, as well as some private transfers and our full day trip taking us across the border from Karakol (Kyrgyzstan) to Almaty (Kazakhstan) via Charyn Canyon and the lakes. The tours can be found on "Get Your Guide", but you can contact them directly for and quote promo code **#Spendlesstravelmore** for a discounted price. See details below.

KYRGYZ WOW TRAVEL CONTACT DETAILS

Contact Azema at Kyrgyz Wow Travel and quote promo code **#Spendlesstravelmore** via instagram or whatsapp:

 **kyrgyz_wow_travel**

 **+996 772 195 094**



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ESSENTIAL KIT

GENERAL GEAR - PREPARE FOR ALTITUDE

- **Layers** are essential. It can be very hot in Bishkek (30°C - 40°C) but once you start ascending into high altitude spots such as Song-Kul and Altyn Arashan, the temperature drops dramatically. We were thankful for our down jackets in the yurt camps!
- **Suncream** and **lip balm** with a high SPF is essential - you will burn much faster at altitude. Reapply multiple times a day. Sunglasses and a buff will also help protect against the sun.
- Consider picking up some **altitude medication** prior to your trip - I normally get this through Boots Online doctor.
- **Backpacks** are easiest for getting about here and for squashing into marshutkras - take a large backpack and a smaller daypack to take on your horseriding excursions. These are [Jordan's](#) and [Chrisy's](#) large bags.
- **Head torch** - useful for the yurt camps at night. [We use these.](#)

FOR YOUR HORSERIDING TRIPS

- **Comfortable clothing** is key with full length leg cover (do not wear shorts!) to prevent any rubbing. Leggings or hiking trousers and long socks are ideal.
- **Half chaps** can be helpful if you have them to prevent rubbing, but not essential. Jordan brought hers and wore them with walking boots. Chrisy didn't have any but the guide did take pity on him and lend him some because he had an insect bite that was rubbing against the saddle!
- **Riding hats** were provided on the Song Kul trip but not the Ala Kul trip (they could have been if we had asked in advance though). You can bring your own if you'd prefer.
- A **daypack** for your clothes/essentials for the 3 day trips. At Song Kul, we were able to pack these into saddle bags (but left our large luggage behind). For Ala Kul, we had to wear our backpacks while riding (so be mindful of this and pack light!)
- Thin **gloves** can be helpful to prevent blisters while riding.
- There's no electricity at the yurt camps so bring a **power bank** and **head torch**.
- Bring a **swimsuit** - at Song Kul, you can have a cold dip in the lake! At Altyn Arashan, you can use the hot springs - also remember to bring a quick dry towel
- **Hand sanitiser** will come in handy if there's a lack of running water

THE ITINERARY



The payoff is worth the hassle

Most travellers we came across were either visiting Kyrgyzstan only for 2 weeks, or on longer term trips with more time to spare. Adding in Kazakhstan adds a border crossing but it is definitely worth the hassle.

We have detailed our refined itinerary - on paper, this looks slower paced than our normal itineraries but we really think we nailed this one, as you do need to factor in jet-lag, wriggle room for unreliable transport and some down time - especially after spending hours in the saddle. It's pretty much our exact itinerary, with a couple of tweaks, which are clearly outlined. We have also provided alternatives throughout.



Detailed breakdown

The next few pages show an overview of the route and 3 week itinerary. This is followed by a detailed breakdown of each day's travel, accommodation, activities and cost. There's also a cost summary and alternative routes at the end of the guide.

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OUR ROUTE

ROUTE SUMMARY

- Bishkek → Kyzart
- Kyzart → Tamchy
- Tamchy → Bokonbayevo
- Bokonbayevo → Karakol
- Karakol → Kegen Border
- Kegen Border → Almaty via Charyn Canyon



We didn't go further south in Kyrgyzstan due to time, but also the lack of transport links. A new highway from Balykchy to Osh was due to open in 2025 but has been delayed. This may make travel to the south easier in the future.

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3 WEEK ITINERARY

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DAY 1 BISHKEK

- Arrive into Bishkek Airport
- Bus, marshutkra or transfer to the city
- Check out Ala-Too square and the surrounding area
- Consider a walking tour

DAY 2 BISHKEK

- Visit different locations across the city on a food tour
- Sample local delicacies at Osh Bazaar
- Visit Central Mosque

DAY 3 ALA-ARCHA

- Get the bus to Ala Archa national park
- Hike thorough the park or organise to ride horses instead
- Take in the views from the newly opened cable car

DAY 4 KYZART

- Travel to Kyzart by private driver or marshutkra
- Stop off at Burana tower if you have a private transfer
- Take a stroll around the peaceful village
- Dine at your accomodation

DAY 5 SONG KUL

- Start your 3 days of horseriding from Kyzart to Song Kul lake
- Sleep in a yurt in the mountains
- Embrace nomadic culture

DAY 6 SONG KUL

- Continue your journey by horseback
- Gallop for the first time (if you're new to riding)
- Take a dip in Song Kul lake
- Play volleyball at the yurt camp

DAY 7 TAMCHY

- Take in the mountain views on the last day of your ride
- Have a final lunch with your guides and peers
- Take a transfer to Tamchy
- Meet your CBT host and settle into your accomodation

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DAY 8
TAMCHY

- Attend the festival of horse games
- Observe traditional dances, sports and eagle hunting
- Participate in some of the activities
- Enjoy local cuisine provided as part of your ticket

DAY 9
BOKONBAYEVO

- Navigate your way to Bokonbayevo
- You may need to get creative and partly hitchhike
- Explore the town before settling into your accomodation

DAY 10
BOKONBAYEVO

- Learn about the practice of eagle hunting
- Try your hand at archery
- Spend the afternoon relaxing at Tong beach

DAY 11
BOKONBAYEVO

- Take a taxi to Fairytale (Skazka) Canyon
- Traverse the otherworldly landscape

DAY 12
KARAKOL

- Take a marshutkra to Karakol
- Try Ashlyan-Fu in it's namesake alley
- Explore the town and pick up snacks and supplies

DAY 13
ALTYN ARASHAN

- Begin your next 3 day horseriding trip
- Take in the scenery as you arrive by horseback to Altyn Arashan
- Bathe in the soothing hot springs
- Settle into the yurt camp

DAY 14
ALA-KUL

- Ride up to an elevation of 3500m
- Hike the final ridge for views of Ala Kul and the surrounding mountains and glaciers
- Return to Altyn Arashan for another night in your yurt

3 WEEK ITINERARY

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DAY 15 ALTYN ARASHAN

- Your final day on horseback
- Descend back down to the beginning of the trail
- Head back into Karakol for the afternoon
- Enjoy a final Kyrgyz dinner in town

DAY 16 KARAKOL

- Take a private transfer for this full on day
- Cross the border from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan
- Visit Kolsai and Kaindy lakes
- Brief visit to Charyn Canyon before arriving in Almaty

DAY 17 ALMATY

- Ride the single line on the metro
- Visit the wooden cathedral
- Take a walking tour to learn more about the city

DAY 18 ALMATY

- Visit Central Park
- Have lunch at the Green Market
- Take the cable car up to Kok-Tobe for panoramic views and a photo with the Beatles

DAY 19 ALMATY

- Take a tour to Charyn Canyon, Moon Canon and Black Canyon
- Walk through the Valley of Castles down to the river
- Take a wild ride back through the canyon on an open top truck

DAY 20 ALMATY

- Take a day trip to Turgan Gorge and Issyk Lake
- Enjoy the waterfall and gorge views after a short hike
- Witness the bluest lake you'll ever see

DAY 21 DEPARTURE

- Make your journey home after a wonderful trip to 2 of the 'stans

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DAY 1 BISHKEK

STAY IN BISHKEK DAYS 1-3

We only spent 2 days here, but we have added a day to visit Ala-Archa national park.

HOTEL

Bugu Hotel, Bishkek - 2 nights - £92 - en suite double room incl. breakfast

- 20 minute walk from central area and Ala-Too square
- Very clean, stylish hotel. Probably more than we would have spent normally but this was our honeymoon, and still extremely good value.

TRANSPORT - ARRIVAL OPTIONS FROM BISHKEK AIRPORT

- We pre-booked a private transfer through our hotel for £14 (45 mins)
- Yandex, taxis (beware of scams)
- Marshutkra (number 380) which takes around 1 hour to arrive in the city centre. You will likely need a Yandex to take you from there to your hotel.
- Bus (number 153) takes 1-1.5 hours to reach the city centre. These are less frequent than the marshutkras.

ON ARRIVAL

Our flight arrived very early in the morning, so we arrived jet-lagged and were grateful we had organised an airport transfer through our hotel. Normally I'm a big fan of using public transport where possible, but I found conflicting information online and was unsure whether the public transport options would be operating at that time. For the difference of £8, it just wasn't worth the hassle - pick your battles!

WALKING TOUR

- We had brunch in a local cafe before heading back to the hotel to check in (and have a nap!)
- Later, we did a **"Street Murals" tour** (this started at 5pm) - which was a good introduction to the city, covering Ala-Too square and the surrounding parks, which are home to numerous statues and historical monuments. Although this was ideal for something to do with our evening, it did overlap a little with some of things we saw on the food tour we took on day 2 (if we had to pick one - it would definitely have been the food tour). [Click here to book](#) - cost £29 pp.



At the time, we couldn't find any "free" walking tours, but it does seem like some have now started operating in Bishkek, so one of these could be a good alternative. We often book/join these through [Guruwalks](#).

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DAY 2 BISHKEK

HOTEL

Bugu Hotel, Bishkek

TRANSPORT

- Included in tour
- Yandex after the tour

PRIVATE FOOD AND CITY TOUR

We don't normally go for private tours, but we were struggling to find many city tour options at the time - more walking tours have now popped up which will come at a lower cost, but honestly, this was such a great tour and we felt it was well worth the money.

This tour includes private transport for the day, traditional snacks and tea in a yurt, a guided walking tour of the main sites around Ala Too square and lunch at a traditional restaurant which is popular with locals (the guide advised us on traditional dishes to order). You will then visit Osh Bazaar and finish at another lovely restaurant for a traditional Kyrgyz dessert. This tour can be booked [here](#). Cost: £50 pp.



CENTRAL MOSQUE

In the afternoon, we took a Yandex to the Central Mosque - note that if you want to go inside, women must cover their head with a head scarf and have covered shoulders and knees. Men must also have knees covered (long trousers).



FOOD RECOMMENDATIONS IN BISHKEK

- **Navat** - central Asian cuisine - we did actually dine here for dessert as part of the food tour, but also ate dinner here one night - highly recommend.
- **Cyclone** - Italian - this cute little restaurant has a nice al fresco area, and the food was unbelievable - it's the best pizza I've had outside of Italy!
- There's a big coffee scene in the city, with lots of good coffee shops eg. **Capito** and **Bublik** (many branches throughout the city).

DAY 3 ALA ARCHA

OPTIONAL EXTRA DAY IN BISHKEK - ALA ARCHA NATIONAL PARK

We didn't have time to visit and felt that we would see a lot of nature elsewhere on the trip, but the information is based on talking to other travellers who did visit during the time we were in Kyrgyzstan.

TRANSPORT

- Bus no. 1 from Bishkek to Ala Archa park entrance
- Park shuttle bus

We didn't have time to visit Ala Archa, but this is a popular spot for day hikes or horse-riding. Previously, it was quite difficult to get to without an organised tour or your own transport. However, as of 2025, there is a public bus (number 1), that goes directly to the park entrance. From there, you can use the free shuttle buses to get to the popular trails. There is also a cable car that has partially opened (February 2026) but work is ongoing to extend the distance covered, offering a new perspective on the national park.



There are a number of different hiking trails and horseriding can either be organised in advance via a tour that will include your transport, or through an operator who will meet you at the park entrance. Hiking and horseriding tours in Ala Archa can be [found here](#).



ACCOMODATION ALTERNATIVE

Although we were happy with our hotel, the best rated hostel in Bishkek on Tripadvisor is Tunduk Hostel. At the time of writing had private twin rooms for around £24 per night. Although we didn't stay there, we organised some of our trips through them and found the owners extremely helpful. We did visit the hostel to pay a deposit for a trip and it had a great backpacker vibe, and we would have stayed here ourselves. The only con is that it's a bit further from the centre but still easy to reach by Yandex for £2-£3 for a journey across the city. Book [here](#).

DAY 4 KYZART

BISHKEK → KYZART

HOTEL

Kyzart Hotel - 1 night - £60 - en suite triple room incl. breakfast and dinner

- The family were very helpful - they helped organise our onward travel when we returned from the horse riding excursion and we were able to leave laundry with them, so it was ready on our return.
- The food was delicious - our first experience of local Kyrgyz hospitality.

TRANSPORT

We needed to get to Kyzart for the Song-Kul horse riding trip.

There are 2 ways to do this:

- Get an early marshutkra from the bus station in Bishkek to Kyzart to arrive in time for lunchtime on the day your tour will start. The bus station is north of the city so allow enough time to get there (at least 30 minutes by Yandex from the city centre) and you should aim for the 7am marshutkra.
- Private taxi/transfer from Bishkek to Kyzart - this can be combined with a stop at Burana tower and cost £76 in total.

BURANA TOWER

We opted for option 2 because we wanted to see Burana tower and had planned to arrive the day before the tour. We contacted a few different people to get prices, but there were all very similar, so we arranged the driver through **Kyrgyz Wow Travel** (we had organised the Song Kul horse riding trip through them). However, if you're tight for time and budget, I would recommend option 1.

KYZART VILLAGE

This is a very small village with virtually no amenities - no restaurants and there are two tiny shops (ran from the owner's front room of the house), so if you are staying overnight, you will need to have dinner at your accommodation. There is no ATM or bank in the village so you will need to withdraw enough cash to pay for the horseriding excursion and any other costs during your time here. Our hotel did accept card payments but many do not.

Kyzart was very rural and peaceful - we had a wander through the village, but there isn't really much else to do other than relax. I would recommend a maximum of 1 night here either before or after the horse riding trip.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 5 SONG-KUL

HORSERIDING TRIP TO SONG-KUL LAKE

ACCOMODATION

Traditional yurts - included in the excursion and organised by the tour operator. Although we were sleeping on mattresses on the floor, they were surprisingly comfortable and warm.

TRANSPORT

- 15 minute walk from hotel to meeting point for horseriding
- Horses!

This was the best thing that we did in Kyrgyzstan! There are variations on this tour with different durations, but we felt that the 3 day/2 night tour was perfect. We booked via a local tour operator, [Kyrgyz Wow Travel](#) - these guys were really helpful, and we organised further transport and excursions with them too. The tour can be found on "Get Your Guide", but you can contact them directly for more info and quote promo code #Spendlesstravelmore for a discounted price. [Contact details here.](#)



NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY

The meeting point for the tour was a 10/15 minute walk from our hotel in Kyzart (it is a similar distance from the main road if you are arriving via marshutkra). We left our main luggage at the hotel - you can only bring small rucksacks on the tour, as they must fit into the saddle bags, but you can also leave your luggage at the base for the trip if needed.



Arrive for lunch, which is provided before departure. You will then be assigned a horse for the trip and given a demonstration on how to ride if you're a beginner (this was very brief), before setting off. I am an experienced horse rider but Chrisy has never ridden before - he will admit that the first 30 minutes or so were nerve-wracking but after that, all of the newbies settled in and everyone was galloping by the last day!



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 6 SONG-KUL

ACCOMODATION

Traditional yurt - with a log burner to keep you toasty at the high altitude.

TRANSPORT

Horses

3 DAYS OF HORSERIDING - WHAT TO EXPECT

We rode for about 4 hours each day, with a short break about halfway. Riding hats were provided. We rode in a group of 6 plus 2 guides, but at each yurt camp, we were joined by another 2 groups for the evening. We arrived at Song-Kul lake on the 2nd day, which was absolutely stunning, and had some free time for a (very cold) dip in the lake and some volleyball. We slept in yurts both nights - bedding was provided, and there was a log burner in the yurt at Song-Kul. All food and bottled water was provided.

Take plenty of layers - while it was very warm at the meeting point, as you climb in elevation, the temperature very quickly drops. We went from departing Kyzart in t-shirts to wearing multiple layers and down jackets at Song-Kul.

NOT TO BE MISSED

The views were spectacular, and this incredible place can only be truly experienced by horseback. You will feel like you are immersed in the nomadic traditions of the Kyrgyz people. Chrisy rates this as the best trip he's ever done - and that's coming from a complete novice horserider!



DAY 7 SONG-KUL

SONG KUL → KYZART → TAMCHY

On the last day, we looped around to make our descent via a different route to arrive back in Kyzart for lunch (also provided). We then made the onward journey to Tamchy.

ACCOMODATION

CBT Tamchy. £38 for 2 nights, private room, shared bathroom, breakfast included and 1 dinner (details below).

TRANSPORT

- We opted for a private taxi from Kyzart to Tamchy as we needed to arrive on a particular day. We organised this through Kyzart hotel. This took around 2.5 hours and cost £15pp when split between 4 of us.
- Alternatively, you could get a taxi to Kochkor and then organise onward transport from there.
- Marshutkras only depart from the main road beside Kyzart in the morning - so if you want to travel with one, you would need to stay overnight in the village after returning from horseriding.

COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM (CBT)

We contacted the CBT co-ordinator (Billim) via Whatsapp (details can be found on the [CBT website](#)), a few weeks prior to arriving to check there would be availability, but in reality, they find you a place to stay if you just turn up. We arrived at the co-ordinators house - it was a bit hectic as there were many travellers arriving for the festival, but Billim directed guests to various different houses and we were soon following our host further into the village to their house. We were given a private room, with shared bathroom. Breakfast is included and dinner is optional - we had dinner there on one of the two nights we stayed. In typical Kyrgyz fashion, we were met with an array of sides, bread and tea for all meals. We only utilised CBT here, but there are many CBT groups throughout Kyrgyzstan and we thoroughly recommend.



TAMCHY

Tamchy is a little beach village on the northern shore of Issyk-Kul lake, with a few restaurants and shops along the main street leading down to the beach. There are a few beachside bars, shops and ice cream stands.

DAY 8 TAMCHY

FESTIVAL OF HORSE GAMES

Although it felt like we were going in the wrong direction compared to the rest of our route, we specifically wanted to be in Tamchy on this date for the "Festival of Horse Games".

ACCOMODATION

- CBT Tamchy

TRANSPORT

- Hitchhiked a ride to the festival - 5mins
- Walk along the beachfront from the festival to Tamchy village - 45 mins

THE FESTIVAL

This is an annual festival, aimed at tourists in order to showcase Kyrgyz sports and traditions. On the shore of Issyk-Kul, it's a stunning location to watch (and even participate in) the activities from traditional music and dance to horse wrestling, eagle hunting and Kok-boru - the Kyrgyz version of basketball (except on horseback, using a goat carcass!). It was such a fantastic day with lunch included in your ticket price (£16 pp).



HITCHHIKING

There is a big hitchhiking culture in Kyrgyzstan. We did this a couple of times and found the locals so helpful. Caution should always be taken with hitchhiking and it is generally not recommended in many countries. However, we felt very safe in Kyrgyzstan and only had positive experiences. Our first hitchhiking venture was just a few km along the main road from Tamchy to the location of the festival. Alternatively, it would be around a 45 minute walk, which we did on the way back, along the beachfront.

DAY 9 BOKONBAYEVO

TAMCHY → BOKONBAYEVO

Base yourself in the peaceful outskirts of Bokonbayevo for the next 3 days of exploring.

ACCOMMODATION

Kairyma Eco Resort Bokonbayevo - 3 nights - £110 private heated yurt with 3 beds, shared bathroom, breakfast and dinner included.

- Located just outside of the town, up a hill with a lovely view of the surrounding mountains. Rated the best place to stay in the area.
- We stayed in a private yurt (with a heater and actual beds), but they also have ensuite cabins which looked really cosy. There's a large communal yurt where meals are served.
- The staff were great, and helped us organise our plans over the next couple of days, as well as taxis (Yandex is not currently present in this area), and also offered a laundry service.

TRANSPORT

- Hitchhiked from Tamchy to Balykchy (30 minutes) as we knew Balykchy would have more transport options. We were picked up by a family who were great fun, and while they spoke very limited English, they still communicated, using Google translate, showing us photos of their village and sharing bread with us. (I don't think they were keen on the sour sweets we offered in return!). We offered them some money for the lift but they would only accept the equivalent of about £2. They dropped us at the "bus station" in Balykchy (more of a chaotic car park).
- Shared taxi from Balykchy to Bokonbayevo (2.5 hours). £3.40pp
- Taxi from Bokonbayevo to the accommodation - it's a 30 minute walk from the town but we opted for a taxi instead of carrying our luggage - £3

We arrived into Bokonbayevo, a small town on the south side of Issyk-Kul and headed to the CBT/tourist office to ask about activities/things to do in the area, then were able to leave our large rucksacks there while we went to get lunch and change some money at the bank before heading to our accommodation. We just relaxed for the afternoon and ate dinner at the accommodation, which was excellent.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 10 BOKONBAYEVO

ACCOMMODATION

Kairyma Eco Resort

TRANSPORT

- Transport included in the cost of the eagle hunting demonstration
- Taxi to Tong arranged by the accommodation £3.50 each way.

EAGLE HUNTING DEMONSTRATION

We organised this through our accommodation along with other guests staying there, which meant we could split the cost between us. You can also organise this through [Kyrgyz Wow Travel](#) (use promo code #spendlesstravelmore). The demonstrations generally cost £50-£60 per group (so we paid £8.50 each) and take place in the hills just behind our accommodation. The eagle trainer came to pick us up and dropped us off afterwards (but in theory we could have walked back ~30 minutes, which some people in our group did). The lift involved a surreal car ride with the eagle herself!



TONG BEACH

We then arranged a taxi to Tong, a nearby beach on the shore of Issyk-Kul. We had a relaxing afternoon on the beach and swam in the lake. There are lots of food stands and yurts selling ice cream and refreshments directly on the beach. We contacted the same taxi to collect us later on before returning to Kairyma for dinner again.



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Other things to do around Bokonbayevo:

- Kadji Sai hot springs
- Tuz Kol salt lake
- Shatyly viewpoint hike
- Other beaches along the south coast of Issyk Kul
- You can organise a combined eagle hunting and horseriding tour through the CBT tourism office



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 11 BOKONBAYEVO

FAIRYTALE (SKAZKA) CANYON

Fairytale canyon is en route to Karakol from Bokonbayevo - if you had your own transport, it would be easy to tie in. Instead, we visited as a day trip and then travelled to Karakol the following day.

ACCOMMODATION

Kairyma Eco Resort

TRANSPORT

- Taxi to Skazka Canyon (40 minutes), arranged through our accommodation - we were able to share with another couple who wanted to visit that day too.
- The driver waited for 2 hours while we visited. The round trip cost £20 for the car, so £5pp.

GETTING TO THE CANYON

The canyon is not particularly accessible by public transport - if you did take a marshutkra and ask them to stop at the turning off the main road, the actual canyon is a further 3km down the track from the entrance, but in theory it's possible if you don't mind the walk (be aware there's very little shade - it was pretty hot the day we visited). You would then need to try and wave down a marshutkra after your visit or hitchhike back to the accommodation. We took the more costly but safe bet of a prearranged taxi.

"FAIRYTALE" CANYON

This otherworldly place is definitely worth a visit. You could stroll endlessly through the undulating landscape, feeling like you're on Mars or have dropped right into a fantasy novel.

There are toilets and a stall selling souvenirs, but nowhere to store luggage (we had considered trying to visit en route to Karakol but would have had to carry all our gear).

After visiting the canyon, we stopped off in Bokonbayevo town for lunch and coffee before walking back to Kairyma.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 12 KARAKOL

BOKONBAYEVO → KARAKOL

Karakol is a small city with plenty of amenities (banks, shops, restaurants etc) and is the gateway to Altyn Arashan and numerous hiking/trekking opportunities.

ACCOMODATION

Jamilya's Bnb - £27 - 1 night, private double room, shared bathroom, breakfast included.

- This was highly recommended and lived up to expectation. About 20 minutes walk to the centre of town, it was a fantastic hostel with a beautiful little garden and served the best breakfast we had in Kyrgyzstan (a pretty mean feat as the breakfasts were generally great throughout the country).
- We stayed another night here, after our 2nd horse riding trip and were able to store our large bags here as well as have laundry done while we were on the trip.

TRANSPORT

- Taxi from accommodation to Bokonbayevo to the marshutkra stop.
- Marshutkra £3.40pp to Karakol (2.5hrs). We were told vaguely to arrive at the stop "in the morning". We arrived for 9/9.30am and it departed about 20 minutes later.
- Yandex from the bus station in Karakol to our accommodation.

KYRGYZ HOSPITALITY

A local family got on the marshutkra and sat near us, who then spent the journey communicating in broken English, singing, sharing snacks and vodka (at 10am!). It made for an entertaining journey to say the least!



ASHLYAN FU

After arriving at the hostel and dropping our bags, we headed into town for lunch - at **Ashlyan-Fu alley**, a covered alley with several places selling the same dish - spicy cold noodle soup with fried bread. It might not sound appetising but it was delicious and cost around £1.50 per portion.

We had intended to see some of the local landmarks but it was pouring with rain so we just dodged the weather for a while by playing games at **Karakol Coffee** (a traveller hotspot), before dinner at **Altyn Kumara** (booking is recommended as this is very popular).

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 13 ALTYN ARASHAN

3 DAY HORSERIDING TRIP - ALTYN ARASHAN

Although there are lots of hiking routes in the area, we opted to take horses instead for this 3 day / 2 night trip due to the high altitude.

ACCOMODATION

Nomad Life Yurt Camp,
Altyn Arashan

TRANSPORT

- Taxi from accommodation to the start of the trail to Altyn Arashan (included in cost of the tour).
- Horses

WHAT TO EXPECT

This trip was also organised via [Kyrgyz Wow Travel](#). It included transport to the start of the trail, 2 nights at the yurt camp, lunch on day 1, 2 dinners, 2 breakfasts and a packed lunch for day 2. We were not provided with riding hats or saddle bags on this trip (so you can definitely only bring a small bag as you will need to wear it while riding) and we had one guide between four of us. The tour can be found on "Get Your Guide", but you can contact them directly for more info and quote promo code #Spendlesstravelmore for a discounted price. [Contact details here.](#)



ALTYN ARASHAN

Altyn Arashan is a small village in the mountains made up of a cluster of yurt camps and some small hotels, surrounded by beautiful scenery and hot springs. It's only accessible by hiking, horse or soviet-era army truck. It was very cold at night so we actually went over to Hotel Arashan to buy drinks and play cards in the communal area (and use the western toilets!) In the evenings. There's also a little shop and a fast food stand (I very much enjoyed my wrap from here when I couldn't face more soup and bread).



HOT SPRINGS

There are hot springs in Altyn Arashan - you can bathe in the "wild" hot springs or use the huts next to the river between Nomad Life yurt camp and Hotel Arashan. As we were staying at Nomad Life, they had reserved a slot for us in one of the hot springs, which was much appreciated after a long day of riding. If you're feeling brave, you can go for a dip in the cold river beside them too!



DAY 14 ALTYN ARASHAN

ALTYN ARASHAN → ALA KUL LAKE → ALTYN ARASHAN

ACCOMODATION

Nomad Life Yurt Camp, Altyn Arashan

TRANSPORT

- Horses

WHAT TO EXPECT

Unlike the loop that we did for Song-kul, this was a “there and back” route. On the first day, we rode for around 4 hours (with a stop halfway) up to Altyn Arashan. On day 2, we rode to Ala Kul and then took the same route back to Altyn Arashan. We stayed at the the same yurt camp both nights (and so left our bags here), before descending the same way down to Ak Su where we began the trip.



ALA KUL LAKE

The 2nd day of riding was the longest - we rode for 3 hours before hiking the last part to Ala Kul, then rode 3 hours back to Altyn Arashan. The terrain was a mix of forest and mountains.



Ala Kul is an alpine lake, sitting at 3500m, but you need to climb to a ridge sitting around 4000m to view it from the side we approached. Hikers taking the horseshoe route would still have to traverse the ridge, but come up the opposite side and then down the way we came. We rode the horses as far as the base of this ridge and had to climb the last 300m on foot. This was the hardest thing I have ever done, literally taking about 10 steps before having to stop for breath due to the altitude. I was just grateful I hadn't already done hours of hiking with a huge rucksack prior to this, as many of the hikers we came across had done. Having practically crawled up the steep ridge, I was so glad we had opted to take horses rather than hike the whole thing. The view of Ala Kul and the surrounding mountains and glaciers was stunning from the top - I was able to appreciate that when I eventually got some breath back!



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 14 ALTYN ARASHAN

ALA KUL CONTINUED

TOP TIP

Regularly apply suncream and wear a hat to protect your face from the sun. UV exposure is greater the higher the altitude, so you will be more sensitive to it's effects. I'm quite diligent with suncream and still got lasting marks on my cheeks from this ride (admittedly I had forgotten a cap as I thought we would be provided with riding hats). Cover up and re-apply suncream regularly.

ACCOMODATION FOR HIKERS

The yurt camps will often have space available on the day - some hikers turned up and stayed at the same camp as us, but the hotels/guesthouses do book up in advance, so if you're planning to hike here and you'd rather be guaranteed a roof over your head - it's a good idea to book ahead.



HIKING OPTIONS

- There's a lot of hiking routes that can be done from Karakol, with the most popular being a 3-4 day hike starting from Karakol Valley, going to Ala Kul, Altyn Arashan and then down to Ak Su (in the shape of a horseshoe). This can be self guided, or booked with a guide and hired gear in Karakol. There are a number of yurt camps along the way or you can carry your own camping gear. This is a very challenging hike due to the high altitude - we definitely met some travellers who underestimated this. Depending on your fitness level, it would involve 6-10 hours of hiking each day. Marshutkras or Yandex cabs can be taken to the start of the trail and back from Karakol.
- There and back hiking route to Altyn Arashan, using the same trail we rode along from Ak Su (2 days/1 night).
- The soviet style army trucks frequently travel up to Altyn Arashan (it is not accessible by less hardy vehicles) - so there is also the option to take one of these there or back in combination with a hike/horse riding route, but it's a very bumpy uncomfortable journey!

DAY 15 KARAKOL

ALTYN ARASHAN → KARAKOL

On the final day of the excursion, we retraced our steps down to the start point at Ak Su, along the river Arashan. A taxi was waiting for us to take us back to our accommodation.

ACCOMODATION

Jamilya's Bnb, Karakol

TRANSPORT

- Taxi from end of the trail back to accomodation (included in cost of the tour).
- Yandex

HORSES OR HIKING?

Hiking is very popular in this area, but I knew I'd find this difficult at high altitude, so we opted for the horse riding option. It was definitely the right decision for us, but if we had to choose only one horse riding excursion, it would be Song-Kul. While we enjoyed both and Ala-Kul was beautiful, the Song-Kul trip just seemed more established and better ran (as well as better food and yurts). It also cost less than the Ala Kul trip and so we felt it was better value for money.



That said, we were so glad we did both. The terrain and landscape from Altyn Arashan to Ala Kul was very different to Song-Kul and still very beautiful, so it's definitely still worth a visit, whichever way you choose to do it.



KARAKOL

On arrival back into town, we had a chilled afternoon, picking up supplies and exchanging cash into Tenge ready for our journey to Kazakhstan the following day.

ACCOMODATION ALTERNATIVE

We also had friends staying in the Snow Leopard hostel, and only heard positive things (it even has a sauna!), so this would be a good alternative. It's on the other side of town to Jamilya's and a similar walking distance to the centre.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

Other things to do in and around Karakol:

- Jogolot viewpoint
- Karakol Victory Park
- Holy Trinity Cathedral
- Dungan Mosque
- Jeti Oguz rock formations

DAY 16 KAZAKHSTAN

KARAKOL → KOLSAI LAKE → KAINDY LAKE → CHARYN CANYON → ALMATY

Cross the border from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan, making some sightseeing stops.

ACCOMODATION

[Ozen Palace Hotel](#), Almaty, Kazakhstan - £80 - 3 nights - Large Double en suite room with breakfast included (more details later)

TRANSPORT - KEGEN BORDER CROSSING

- There is not any public transport that will take you over the border from Karakol into Kazakhstan. On researching this and speaking to others, I found that some travellers had managed to hitchhike either side of the border and organise onward travel from Kegen (which is a 30 minute drive from the actual border crossing), but it sounded tricky and unreliable.
- The other options are taking a multi-day tour from Karakol to Almaty (the more costly option) or a private driver.
- We booked a driver through [Kyrgyz Wow Travel](#) - he picked us up from our guesthouse in Karakol, and drove us through border control to Almaty, making pit stops for lunch, at Kolsai lake, Kaindy lake, and Charyn Canyon en route. We were able to split this journey with another couple, which brought the cost down to £65 pp.

EARLY START

This was a big day, and we definitely should have set off earlier. We left Karakol at 9.30am but our driver explained that it would have been better to set off earlier (alas - hindsight). So if you opt for this, I would recommend setting off at 7am or earlier.



KOLSAI LAKE

This is very beautiful but extremely busy with tourists. We only stopped here for about 30 minutes so didn't have time to explore much, If you were to come back here on a day trip or have longer to spend here, there is a boardwalk down to the shore and boat rides across the lake, as well as a number of restaurants.



DAY 16 KAZAKHSTAN

KOLSAI LAKE → KAINDY LAKE → CHARYN CANYON → ALMATY

KAINDY LAKE

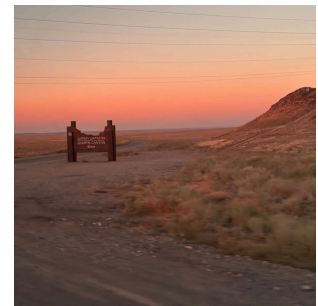
Kaindy is much more secluded - access involves a crazy bumpy road (do not attempt if you've hired a car), up to the car park, then a ride in a soviet army truck to get to the start of the trail. We then hiked down to the lake, which was worth the effort - the "sunken forest" rising from the water surface is surreal.



CHARYN CANYON

Unfortunately, we arrived here just as the sun was setting, so was not able to fully appreciate it. We made the decision to come back another day to explore further.

We finally arrived at our hotel around 11pm. Ultimately, I was still happy with our choice of route, and the decision to return to Charyn Canyon on another day to have more time there.



ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO KAZAKHSTAN

The other option is to head back to Bishkek and enter Kazakhstan via the Korday / Ak-Zhol border crossing.

Karakol → Bishkek options:

- Marshutkra from Karakol to Bishkek - takes 6-7 hours for the full journey. Or you could break this up by stopping off at Cholpon-Alta, a popular holiday town on the northern shore of Issyk-Kul.
- Bus from Karakol to Bishkek - **GoBus** has an overnight bus service.
- If you had hired a car for your travels in Kyrgyzstan, drive back to Bishkek via the northern shore of Issyk-Kul.

Bishkek → Almaty options:

- Bus from Bishkek to Almaty. The bus goes to the border, then you have to change onto a different bus to continue onto Almaty. Journey time is around 5 hrs.
- Fly from Bishkek to Almaty

DAY 17 ALMATY

ALMATY

Kazakhstan is a huge country - we decided to base ourselves in Almaty rather than constantly moving location while barely scratching the surface. Almaty is a stunning multicultural city - we felt like we could have been in a cosmopolitan city in Europe. It's extremely stylish, clean and modern, and English is widely spoken. We really loved the vibe here.

ACCOMODATION

Ozen Palace Hotel - £80 - 3 nights - Large Double en suite room with breakfast included (more details later)

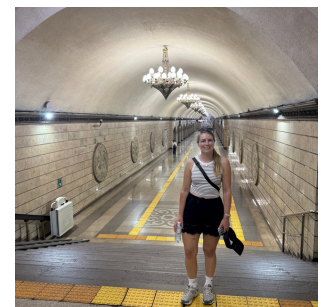
- This was a much fancier hotel than we expected - great value for money. Huge buffet breakfast. It was little out of the way from the central area, but Yandex rides are inexpensive, so this wasn't really an issue.
- The only con was the cost of doing laundry (our idiot tax for the trip), as we foolishly did not check the pricing beforehand. The hotel charged per item and the bill came to around £60! We triple checked the conversion before begrudgingly paying it.
- In summary - great hotel, just don't do your laundry here.

TRANSPORT

- Metro
- Walking
- Yandex - journeys around the city cost £1-£3 generally

METRO

This in itself was somewhat of an activity. There is currently only 1 line so it's not incredibly useful for navigating the city, but the stations are beautifully decorated and each have a theme (and chandeliers!). We rode the metro in one direction and got off at a couple of stops to admire the mosaics.



WALKING TOUR - NOT TO BE MISSED

"Free" (tip-based) walking tour, booked through **Guru Walks**. We have done many of these style of walking tours throughout Europe, and without doubt, this was the best one we have been on! Our guide, **Aiguerim**, was so knowledgeable and gave us some more tour contacts to try, when we explained we were struggling to find group trips to join. The tour lasted 4.5hrs and was really comprehensive, including a visit to the wooden cathedral and the Green Market. Aiguerim also talked us through many of the delicacies and obtained samples for us to try. If you visit Almaty, this is not to be missed. [Click here to book.](#)

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 18 ALMATY

CENTRAL PARK AND KOK TOBE

HOTEL

Ozen Palace Hotel

TRANSPORT

Yandex

We had booked a tour for Charyn Canyon, but the company cancelled on us because they didn't have enough bookings, which left us with a free day.

CENTRAL PARK

We walked around "Central Park" and visited the Dinopark (so bad it was actually quite entertaining) and the Zoo, which wasn't great compared to UK welfare standards.

Spent some more time at the Green Market, stopping here for lunch and souvenir shopping, before stopping for an iced coffee in a little tucked-away coffee shop, "**Tereze**".



KOK TOBE

It's hard to describe this place - it's a hilltop mini-theme park with panoramic views of the city, some rides, activities and a Beatles (yes the band) bench. There's restaurants, amusements and a bandstand with various performances. It's worth getting the cable car up here for the views - we went at sunset, and the place just got more lively as it got darker. There was a branch of **Navat** around a 10 minute walk from the base of the hill, so we went there for dinner.

TOURS FROM ALMATY

- There are many day tours departing from Almaty which visit **Charyn Canyon and the lakes**, but most of these are 16-17 hours long (even longer than our travel day). There are also **2-3 day options** - if you travelled to Kazakhstan via Bishkek, I would recommend this option over squeezing it in to a single day tour.
- We were able to find a canyons only tour to go back to visit **Charyn Canyon** on another day.
- Other than the tours to Charyn Canyon, Kolsai and Kaindy lake, we really struggled to find group tours that we could join. There are lots of tour operators in Almaty, and I contacted several, but other than this trip, most excursions seemed to be private tours only. If you had more in your party to split the cost, it may have been worth it, but as a couple, the private tours were a bit out of budget.

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 19 CHARYN CANYON

DAY TRIP TO CHARYN CANYON

ACCOMODATION

Kazzhol Hotel - £150 - 2 nights, double ensuite with spa access.

- We booked the last 2 nights here, as this trip was technically our honeymoon, we wanted to end it with a bit of luxury. However, this hotel has the feel of somewhere that was once fancy but is just a little tired now.
- The breakfast was excellent - buffet style with a huge choice of options.
- The "Spa" left something to be desired. Unfortunately the sauna was being repaired and so we could not use it during our stay. There was a small pool and gym, but no spa treatments.
- While the location was good - walkable to the central area, we would have preferred to stay at the Ozen Palace for the whole duration instead.
- This hotel is often recommended in guidebooks and blogs (partly why we booked it), but we feel that it just is not good value for money.

TRANSPORT

- Yandex to meeting point for the tour (near city centre)
- Minibus transport included in the tour which cost £14 pp

We finally managed to book a group tour through "[Join Me Asia](#)", to **Charyn Canyon, Black Canyon and Moon Canyon**. This was a full day, with us visiting the smaller Canyons first and finishing at Charyn Canyon. We have since found similar tours available through [Viator here](#).

Charyn Canyon is said to be the little sister to the Grand Canyon - and is very impressive in it's own right. You can look down into the canyon from the top, and also hike through the "Valley of Castles" for around 2km down to the river. Return uphill on foot or pay to ride one of the open top trucks that shuttle between the river and the start of the trail. There is a restaurant and a couple of take-away food stalls next to the car park.

It was definitely worth returning to spend more time here to fully appreciate the canyon.



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

DAY 20 ALMATY

DAY TRIP TO TURGEN GORGE, BEAR WATERFALL AND ISSYK LAKE

HOTEL

Kazzhol Hotel

TRANSPORT

Minibus transport included in the tour which cost £26 pp (pick up from hotel)

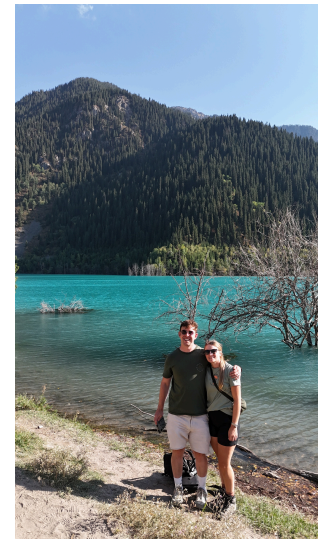
BEAR WATERFALL

This day tour includes a 30 minute hike up to “Bear” waterfall. The waterfall itself is not particularly impressive but the views of the gorge from the viewpoint are worth the walk. We booked this with [Get Your Guide here.](#)



ISSYK LAKE

After a break for lunch at a local restaurant, we then stopped at Issyk Lake - we actually felt that this was the prettiest of the lakes we had seen in Kazakhstan, and certainly the quietest, with very few tourists there.



FOOD RECOMMENDATIONS IN ALMATY

- **Nedelka** - chain with several locations throughout the city. Great coffee, sandwiches and western dishes.
- **Navat** - the same chain that we dined at in Bishkek. There are a few branches across the city. It was absolutely bustling and there was some live dancing on while we were seated.
- **Sandyq** - the best restaurant that we ate at in Almaty. Local Kazakh dishes in a stunning environment with a lovely atmosphere. This felt like a really upscale experience for an extremely good price. We ordered a starter to share, 3 main dishes and 2 desserts, and it came to around £50 including drinks. Highly recommend - booking is essential.



DAY 21 GOODBYE

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE - ALMATY

- **Tanbaly Petroglyphs** - at the time of writing, we couldn't find any group tours - only private ones, costing more than £100 per person (I contacted a lot of local operators!). Click [here](#) to book.
- **Big Almaty Lake** - in theory, you can get there by Yandex/taxi but we heard of people who tried this and had trouble accessing the area. You can go as part of a group tour - there are many options [here](#).
- Hiking at **Shymbulak** (Chimbulak) - a ski resort during the winter months but you can ride the cable cars during the summer too.
- **Overnight trips to visit Charyn Canyon and the lakes** - I would recommend one of these if you didn't visit them en route already, as it will give you more time to explore. [Find tours here](#).
- **Arasan Wellness & Spa** - gender segregated spa

FINALLY, DEPART KAZAKHSTAN

We ordered a Yandex to the airport, which took 25 minutes and cost around £5



SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

HOW MUCH DOES A TRIP TO THE STANS ACTUALLY COST ?

Below are the exact costs from our trip in August 2025 - be aware that the prices may increase, especially as the area becomes more popular. For this trip, we prioritised convenience over cost, but have learned there are definitely more cost effective ways of doing things, with alternatives given throughout the guide. However, we will always be transparent with what we actually spent for our trips, which is what you see here. With more flexibility with flights, using marshutkras rather than private transfers, and opting to hike instead of take horses to Altyn Arashan, you can make significant savings.

Item	Details	Cost	Cost for a couple	Cost per person
Flights	Birmingham → Istanbul → Bishkek Almaty → Doha → Birmingham	£1727	£1727	£864
Accommodation	Bishkek - Double room - 2 nights Incl breakfast	£92	£584	£292
	Kyzart - Triple room - 1 night Incl breakfast and dinner	£60		
	Tamchy - Double room, shared bathroom - 2 nights - incl 2 breakfasts and 1 dinner	£38		
	Bokonbayevo - Private yurt, shared bathroom - 3 nights - incl 3x dinner and breakfasts	£110		
	Karakol - Double room, shared bathroom - 2 nights - incl breakfast	£108		
	Almaty - Double room - 3 nights Incl breakfast	£80		
	Almaty - Double room - 2 nights Incl breakfast	£150		

BUDGET BREAKDOWN

Item	Details	Cost	Cost for a couple	Cost per person
Transport	Airport transfer Bishkek	£14	£253	£127
	Driver Bishkek → Burana → Kyzart	£76		
	Taxi Kyzart → Tamchy	£33		
	Driver Karakol → Almaty	£130		
Activities	Mural tour Bishkek	£67	£918	£459
	Food Tour Bishkek	£100		
	3d/2n horseriding to Song Kul	£225		
	Eagle hunting demonstration	£19		
	3d/2n horseriding Altyn Arashan	£428		
	Charyn Conayon, Black and Moon Canyons trip	£27		
	Bear waterfall and Issyk Lake trip	£52		
Food/spends	This includes food and anything else not covered above.	£821	£821	£411
	Total:		£4303	£2152

SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE - 3 WEEKS

- Bishkek → Kyzart
- Kyzart → Bokonbayevo
- Bokonbayevo → Karakol
- Karakol → Tamchy
- Tamchy → Bishkek
- Bishkek → Almaty

This route takes the alternative border crossing by looping back to Bishkek before entering Kazakhstan. This could work out slightly cheaper, but only makes a significant difference if you're a solo traveller.

KAZAKHSTAN



KYRGYZSTAN

If you choose this route, I would recommend booking a 2-3 day tour of Charyn Canyon and the lakes from Almaty, so you can spend more time at each site. Bear this in mind when booking accommodation as it will be included as part of your overnight tour for those nights. There are lots of options for these trips here ([GYG link](#))

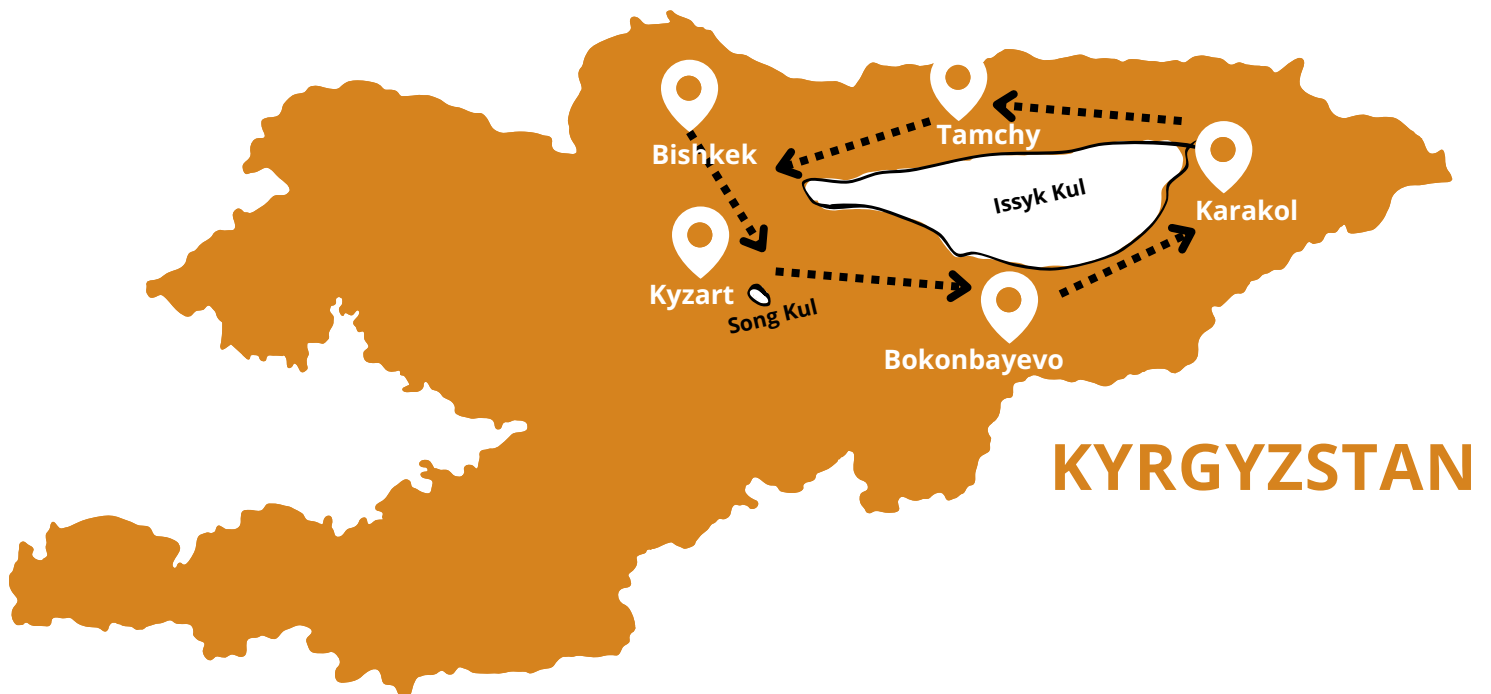
SPEND LESS, TRAVEL MORE

KYRGYSTAN ONLY

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE - 2 WEEKS

- Bishkek → Kyzart
- Kyzart → Bokonbayevo
- Bokonbayevo → Karakol
- Karakol → Tamchy
- Tamchy → Bishkek

This route could be done in 2 weeks - ideal if you're short on time or wanted to explore neighbouring Uzbekistan or Tajikistan instead of Kazakhstan as part of your trip.





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This guide and our other resources are FREE, but if you found them helpful, you can [buy us a coffee here](#), so we can work on producing the next one!

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