

Location: Sary-Chelek Reserve, Kyrgyzstan

Dates: 5th – 14th June 2020

Summary

This ride takes place in Sary Chelek Reserve in the Tien Shan Mountains of Kyrgyzstan. Translated as 'golden hollow', Sary Chelek is considered a charmed land, and a destination that many Kyrgyz can only dream of visiting. The area owes its popularity to its beauty; turbulent rivers rushing from glaciers and aquamarine lakes shimmering beneath jagged mountain ridges, which give way to gentle slopes rich in ancient fruit and walnut forests, as well as carpets of rare alpine flowers.

Lake Sary Chelek itself, known as the 'jewel' of Kyrgyzstan, stretches for 7.5 kilometres into the mountains at an altitude of 1,940 metres. The lake is surrounded by towering yellow boulders, with spruce and fir trees clinging to the steep slopes, their branches home to cormorant and merganser nests. Founded in 1959, Sary Chelek Reserve provides habitat for more than a third of Kyrgyzstan's species of flora and fauna, including many of the world's rarest and most endangered animals and plants, such as the elusive snow leopard, which finds sanctuary and solitude in the highest reaches of the surrounding mountains.

May, June and July are the best time of year to visit Sary Chelek, when the flowers are blooming and the snow on the passes has melted. The days can be hot (20-30C) but there can also be rain and nights are colder (5-10C).

We ride an average of four to five hours per day on local Kyrgyz mountain horses, very agile and suited to the mountains and long distances. Seven guides on horseback accompany us, while a back-up vehicle with cooks and camp helpers, including an English-speaking guide/photographer, goes ahead each day to strike camp. Camping is in three-man tents while a large mess tent, with tables, chairs and china, is provided for meals (lunch is sometimes taken as a picnic), as well as a smaller tent for storing luggage. The cooks provide a menu from all fresh, local ingredients of Russian, Kyrgyz and Uzbek dishes, including many fruits and vegetables. Drinking water is provided throughout the day.

Itinerary

Friday, 5th June London – Moscow – Osh

This afternoon we take connecting Aeroflot flights from LHR – Moscow – Osh. In Moscow airport we can enjoy dinner in a Russian restaurant.

Saturday, 6th June Osh

On arrival in Osh, early in the morning, we are met and transferred to the delightful Sun Rise Hotel where today and tonight are spent. A small, family run hotel, facilities include air conditioning in all rooms, an outdoor swimming pool and WiFi. It is the perfect location from which to explore this exotic Silk Road city, often referred to as the capital of Kyrgyzstan's south. With a history estimated to stretch back 3,000 years, Osh has been historically significant in many different eras. This afternoon we take a city tour with an English-speaking guide and have the opportunity to visit the bazaar, a crucial point for merchants and traders for millennia, and situated in its same location for many centuries. This evening dinner is enjoyed in a local restaurant.

Sunday, 7th June Bishkek – Dharik Tash

Early this morning we leave Osh by minibus for the small hamlet of Dharik Tash (approximately six hours), Our road takes us to the north, along the original Silk Road, and through the ancient town of Uzgen, where we take a tour with a local guide. Located nowadays between the two larger cities of Osh and Djalal-Abad, Uzgen was founded in the second century BC as the capital of the Kara-Khanid Khanate and was one of the main trading points in Central Asia between Samarkand and Kashgar. Mediaeval buildings and narrow streets, including the towering twelfth-century Uzgen minaret, have survived with all their original majesty and beauty. From here we drive to Djalal-Abad, where we have lunch, and then on to Dharik Tash. Tonight's campsite is beside a river and close by a small track leading up into the mountains.

Monday, 8th June Kizel Kel'

Today we meet our horses and set off from camp after breakfast, riding through a magnificent landscape of wooded mountains, jagged rocky peaks, and meadows beneath, full of beautiful wildflowers. After enjoying a picnic lunch we continue our way through wooded mountains to the picturesque Kizel Kel' area, passing charming village houses, surrounded by gardens of hollyhocks and wild orchids, where camp is set up on the banks of a crystal clear mountain river. It is possible to swim and build a campfire.

Tuesday, 9th June Kizel Kel' - Jylgyn

Today we pass through orchards and meadows surrounded by woodland, including magnificent wild mulberry and walnut trees (Sary Chelek is home to the largest walnut forest in the world). We ride to Tas-Bel Pass, following a track that twists uphill through woodland, and then canter through wild flower meadows. We enjoy a picnic lunch near a clear water spring. After lunch we descend further and reach the camp near a waterfall not far from Jylgyn village, where again it is possible to swim in the river.

Wednesday, 10th June Jylgyn - Lake Iri-Kel

After breakfast we enter Sary Chelek Reserve and ride through walnut forests, with many opportunities for trotting and cantering, before reaching our magnificently beautiful campsite beside the turquoise waters of Lake Iri-Kel, near the home of the local park ranger and his family. Surrounded by mountains and meadows of wildflowers, we can swim in the pristine lake, as well as take a ride on the ranger's motor boat. A clear spring, ice cold and rich in minerals, bubbles up just yards from where we camp.

Thursday, 11th June Sary-Chelek Reserve

Today we make a loop and ride around five of the lakes of Sary-Chelek reserve, surrounded all day by the most magnificent scenery. Lunch is on the shores of one of the lakes and we spend the night again in yesterday's camp.

Friday, 12th June Lake Kara-Suu

Today we ride over the beautiful Kotorma Pass (2446m) to Lake Kara-Suu. The route up to the pass is steep and narrow, but easily negotiated by the local Kyrgyz horses. On reaching the top, riders can take in the magnificent view before their horses begin to pick their way downhill, often passing between tall boulders before reaching the camp set up for the night. After lunch in camp and tea in a local yurt, we can watch a game of Ulak-Tartysh (a variation on polo but using the body of a dead goat) on the plateau beside the dramatic Lake Kara-Suu, and this evening back in camp we enjoy a bonfire and a folklore concert with songs and national instruments.

Saturday, 13th June Kizil-Kel' area

This morning we follow the Kara-Suu River back down a series of breathtaking waterfalls and cascades before the river broadens briefly into a wide alluvial plain, only to narrow again where the flow quickens through a stark and rocky landscape. After a picnic lunch beside the river, we drive back to Bishkek (approximately eight hours), through the expansive Susamir Valley, full of nomads with their yurts and flocks of animals. Dinner is taken in a charming local restaurant en route. Tonight is spent at the Asia Mountains Hotel, a small family run hotel with a swimming-pool, air-conditioning and WiFi.

Sunday, 14th June Bishkek

This morning we explore Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, founded by the Russians in the nineteenth century and situated at the foot of the Tien Shan mountains with views of the surrounding glaciers. We can see the enormous Alatau Square, and may also visit the Osh Bazaar, where it is possible to buy colourful Kyrgyz felt carpets and hats, before heading for the airport to take an afternoon flight to LHR, via Moscow.