

ALEXANDRA TOLSTOY

Sary-Chelek Riding Escape, Kyrgyzstan 2019

LOCATION: Sary-Chelek Reserve, Kyrgyzstan

DATES: 4th - 14th June 2019

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 even the Kyrgyz 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 almost 2,000 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 (20-25C) 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. Guides on horseback accompany us, as well as a back up vehicle with cooks and camp helpers, including an English speaking guide/photographer.

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Itinerary

4th June, 2019

Departure London/Moscow

5th June, 2019 Bishkek

On arrival in Bishkek, early in the morning, we are met and transferred to the delightful Asia Mountains Hotel where today and tonight are spent. A small, family run hotel, facilities include air conditioning in all rooms, an outdoor swimming pool, barbeque and WiFi. This afternoon 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 history museum or the state department store, where it is possible to buy colourful Kyrgyz felt carpets and hats. Lunch is in the hotel and dinner is in a local restaurant.

6th June, 2019 Bishkek - Dharik Tash

Early this morning we leave Bishkek by minibus for the small hamlet of Dharik Tash (approximately eight hours), breaking our journey for lunch. The road takes us south over the Too-Ashuu Pass and through beautiful and dramatic steppe land, where nomads spend the summer in their yurts. Tonight's campsite is beside a river and close by a small track leading up into the mountains.

7th June, 2019 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 to Sary-Chelek nature reserve, where camp will be set up in the picturesque Kizel Kel' area.

8th June, 2019 Kizel Kel' - Jylgyn

Today we enter Sary Chelek national park, passing through orchards and meadows surrounded by woodland, including magnificent wild mulberry and walnut trees. We ride to Tas-Bel Pass, following a track that twists uphill through woodland, and then cantering 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.

9th June, 2019 Jylgyn - Lake Iri-Kel

After breakfast, we continue riding through Sary Chelek reserve before reaching our stunningly beautiful campsite beside the turquoise waters of Lake Iri-Kel, where surrounding mountains tower high above us and we can enjoy swimming and fishing in a pristine wilderness setting. A clear spring, ice cold and rich in minerals, bubbles up just yards from where we camp.

10th June, 2019 Sary-Chelek Reserve

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

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11th June, 2019 Lake Kara-Suu

Today we ride over the beautiful Katurma 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 and a rest in camp we enjoy a bonfire and folklore concert with songs and national instruments.

12th June, 2019 Lake Kara-Suu

Today we ride around Lake Kara-Suu, crossing two mountain passes. On our journey we meet nomads with their yurts and cattle, and see the life of Kyrgyz people in the mountains. After lunch with a shepherd and his family in a yurt we can watch national horse games, including Ulak-Tartysh (similar to polo but using the body of a dead goat), Er-Enish (a wrestling match between two men on horseback), and others. Tonight is spent back in last night's camp.

13th June, 2019 Kizil-Kel' area - Osh

This morning we continue on horseback along the shore of Lake Kara-Suu, and then follow the Kara-Suu River 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. We enjoy a short rest beside the river, with the possibility of a refreshing dip. After this we complete our adventure by riding back to the comparative civilization of Kizil-Kel', where we meet the cars and drive to Osh. Overnight in an Uzbek guesthouse.

14th June, 2019 Departure

This morning we drive to Osh airport for a flight at 09:50, arriving in Bishkek at 10:40. From here we are taken by car to Uncle Tom's café not far from the airport where we can have lunch before the flight home.

NOTES:

The cost of this itinerary is based on twin or double accommodation throughout the itinerary. There is a single supplement of £150.

The cost includes accommodation in Bishkek, tented accommodation whilst on the ride, all meals, food and water on the trek, English speaking guide, sightseeing costs, transfers, horses, support staff including drivers, cooks, horsemen and camp assistants.

The cost excludes international flights, travel insurance, visas, gratuities and alcoholic drinks, as well as extras in the hotel such as telephone calls, alcohol etc.

A 50% deposit is required to reserve your place on this ride. The balance 50% is due 8 weeks prior to departure.

The single supplement is waived if guests are prepared to share accommodation.

This ride will be guided and led by Alexandra Tolstoy.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the client to ensure they obtain the correct visa prior to travel. UK visitors to Kyrgyzstan do not currently require a visa. Visitors from other nationalities should check with the Kyrgyzstan embassy in their home country.

The operators and suppliers cannot accept any responsibility for changes to itineraries or dates that may arise due to weather or unforeseen circumstances such as changes, disruptions or delays to air-line flights for whatever reason.