

Kyrgyzstan

КЫРГЫЗСТАН

Kyrgyzstan is tucked into Central Asia's geographical vortex amid a massive knot of colliding mountain ranges. Monster mountains and their associated scraggy valleys, glaciers, gorges and ice-blue lakes dominate over 90% of the country.

Keen on trekking or horse riding? Just pick a range – there's plenty to choose from – and head to the *jailoos*, high-altitude summer pastures of glorious, untrammelled alpine scenery. In true nomadic style, spend the nights camped under a star-crowded sky or bed down in a yurt. Be warned though, the Kyrgyz are renowned for their hospitality and guests are often treated to fermented mare's milk and bowls of fresh yogurt.

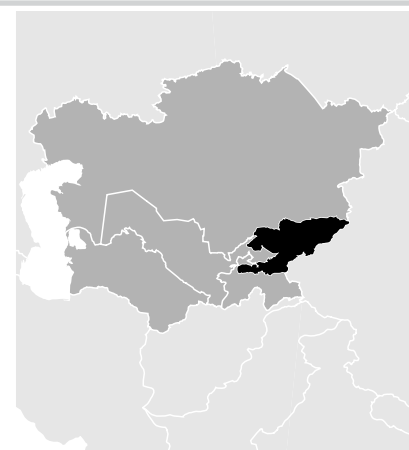
Indeed, nomadic traditions are alive and kicking in Kyrgyzstan. You can take to the hills around Lake Issyk-Köl, the earth's second-largest alpine lake, with a trained eagle to hunt rabbit or cheer wildly alongside the locals during a game of *kok boru*, a ferocious battle in which mounted riders wrestle one another for the corpse of a headless goat.

Cash-strapped locals, struggling to eek out a living in postcommunist Asia, have turned to tourism for help. The creation of sustainable projects are revolutionising budget travel, pushing Kyrgyzstan to the forefront of community tourism and bringing in a little extra money for families. By contrast, now that the long, unyielding arm of Russian law is no longer on the scene, corruption by officials and political turmoil are part of daily life.

Kyrgyzstan may be small, it may be often overlooked but, just like the players in a game of *kok boru*, this tenacious nation packs a powerful wallop and may yet run off with the prize as Central Asia's most appealing and accessible republic.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 198,500 sq km
- **Capital** Bishkek
- **Country Code** ☎ 996
- **Famous For** Towering mountains, eagle hunting, nomadic yurts
- **Languages** Kyrgyz, Russian
- **Money** Kyrgyz som: US\$1 = 38.77som, €1 = 50.7
- **Phrases** *Salam.* (Hello.); *Rahmat.* (Thank you); *Jaqshi.* (Good.)
- **Population** 5.2 million (2006 estimate)



HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.40
- 100km bus ride US\$1.70
- One-minute phone call to the USA US\$0.63
- Internet per hour US\$0.75-1
- Kyrgyz hat US\$3-6
- 1L of bottled water US\$0.40
- Bottle of beer US\$1
- Shashlyk US\$0.80
- 1L of petrol US\$0.60

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Horse treks** (p343) See the Kyrgyz countryside at its best by riding high into the mountains and galloping across summer pastures.
- **Lake Issyk-Köl** (p294) Hemmed in by mountains this bizarrely un-freezeable lake is the country's premier attraction.
- **Altyn Arashan** (p306) Breath-taking scenery, steaming hot pools and the first glimpse of the secret Ala-Köl lake makes for great trekking.
- **Osh** (p334) For centuries Silk Road traders have haggled their way from one stall to the next in a bazaar that locals claim is older than Rome – join them.
- **Arslanbob** (p330) Go nuts in the world's largest walnut forest on a network of blossoming woodland treks.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore around Ala-Too Sq in Bishkek (p278), checking out the unabashedly pro-Soviet murals in the State Historical Museum and go trekking in the Ala-Archa Valley (p290).
- **One week** After Bishkek head east to Karakol (p300) on the shores of Lake Issyk-Köl and spend a few days hiking, horse riding or visiting local eagle hunters.
- **Two weeks** Add on Kochkor (p316), a horse trek to Song-Köl (p318) and a visit to Tash Rabat caravanserai (p325).
- **One month** Weave through the entire country. From Osh (p334), head north to Arslanbob (p330) or Lake Sary-Chelek (p329) en route to Bishkek (p278). Loop around Lake Issyk-Köl including Cholpon-

Ata (p296) before continuing to Kochkor and Naryn (p319). Exit to China via the Torugart Pass (p325).

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Siberian winds bring freezing temperatures and snow from November to February, with ferocious cold in the mountains. The average winter minimum is -24°C .

Throughout the country springtime buds appear in April and May, though nights can still be below freezing. Mid-May to mid-June is pleasant, though many mountain passes will still be snowed in. From the end of June through to mid-August most afternoons will reach 32°C or higher, with a maximum of 40°C in Fergana Valley towns such as Jalal-Abad; mountain valleys are considerably cooler. Like most of the region, Bishkek gets most of its rainfall in spring and early summer.

Of course in the mountains the 'warm' season is shorter. The best time to visit is July to September, although camping and trekking are pleasant from early June through mid-October. Avalanche danger is greatest during March and April and from September to mid-October.

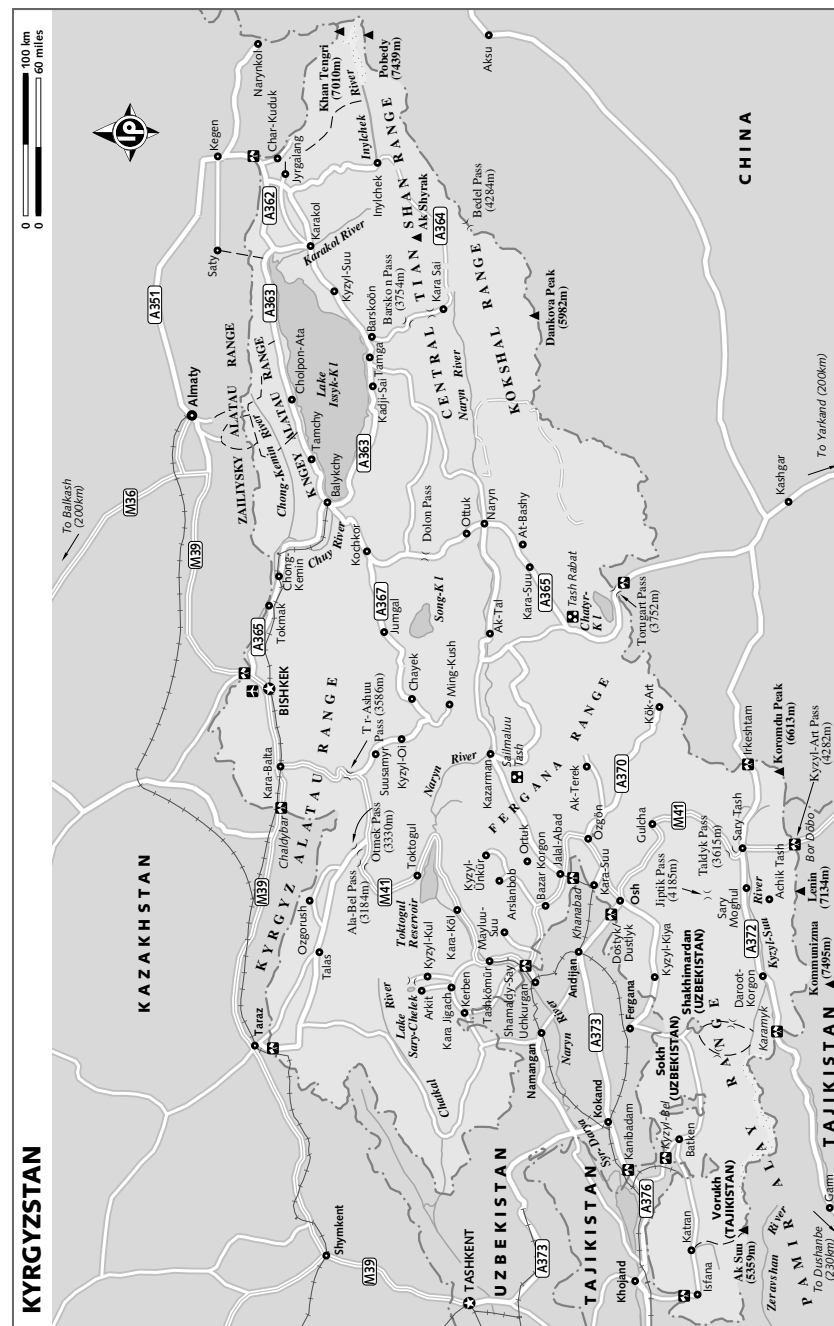
Overall, the republic is best for scenery and weather in September, with occasional freezing nights in October. See the climate charts, p446, for more details.

HISTORY
Early Civilizations

The earliest notable residents of what is now Kyrgyzstan were warrior clans of Saka (also known as Scythians), from about the 6th century BC to the 5th century AD. Rich bronze and gold relics have been recovered from Scythian burial mounds at Lake Issyk-Köl and in southern Kazakhstan.

The region was under the control of various Turkic alliances from the 6th to 10th centuries. A sizeable population lived on the shores of Lake Issyk-Köl. The Talas Valley in southern Kazakhstan and northwest Kyrgyzstan was the scene of a pivotal battle in 751, when the Turks and their Arab and Tibetan allies drove a large Tang Chinese army out of Central Asia.

The cultured Turkic Karakhanids (who finally brought Islam to Central Asia for good) ruled here in the 10th to 12th centuries. One of their multiple capitals was at Balasagun



TRAVELLING SAFELY IN KYRGYZSTAN

Travel advisories still warn against travel off the beaten track along Kyrgyzstan's southern wall, south and west of Osh, which saw incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1999, 2000 and 2001 (see opposite), though, in reality, the threat has largely diminished.

(now Burana, east of Bishkek; see p293). Another major Karakhanid centre was at Özgön (Uzgen) at the edge of the Fergana Valley.

Ancestors of today's Kyrgyz people probably lived in Siberia's upper Yenisey Basin until at least the 10th century, when under the influence of Mongol incursions they began migrating south into the Tian Shan – more urgently with the rise of Jenghiz Khan in the 13th century. Present-day Kyrgyzstan was part of the inheritance of Jenghiz' second son, Chaghatai.

Peace was shattered in 1685 by the arrival of the ruthless Mongol Oyrats of the Zhungarian empire, who drove vast numbers of Kyrgyz south into the Fergana and Pamir Alay regions and on into present-day Tajikistan. The Manchu (Qing) defeat of the Oyrats in 1758 left the Kyrgyz as de facto subjects of the Chinese, who mainly left the locals to their nomadic ways.

The Russian Occupation

As the Russians moved closer during the 19th century, various Kyrgyz clan leaders made their own peace with either Russia or the neighbouring khanate of Kokand. Bishkek – then comprising only the Pishpek fort – fell in 1862 to a combined Russian-Kyrgyz force and the Kyrgyz were gradually eased into the tsar's provinces of Fergana and Semireche.

The new masters then began to hand land over to Russian settlers, and the Kyrgyz put up with it until a revolt in 1916, centred on Tokmak and heavily put down by the Russian army. Out of a total of 768,000 Kyrgyz, 120,000 were killed in the ensuing massacres and another 120,000 fled to China. Kyrgyz lands became part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkestan ASSR) within the Russian Federation in 1918, then a separate Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast (an *oblast* is a province or region) in 1924.

Finally, after the Russians had decided Kyrgyz and Kazakhs were separate nationalities

(they had until then called the Kyrgyz 'Kara-Kyrgyz' or Black Kyrgyz, to distinguish them from the Kazakhs, whom they called 'Kyrgyz' to avoid confusion with the Cossacks), a Kyrgyz ASSR was formed in February 1926. It became a full Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in December 1936, when the region was known as Soviet Kirghizia.

Many nomads were settled in the course of land reforms in the 1920s, and more were forcibly settled during the cruel collectivisation campaign in the 1930s, giving rise to a reinvigorated rebellion by the *basmachi*, Muslim guerrilla fighters, for a time. Vast swathes of the new Kyrgyz elite died in the course of Stalin's purges.

Remote Kyrgyzstan was a perfect place for secret Soviet uranium mining (at Mayluu-Suu above the Fergana Valley, Ming-Kush in the interior and Kadj-Sai at Lake Issyk-Köl), and also naval weapons development (at the eastern end of Issyk-Köl). Kyrgyzstan is still dealing with the environmental problems the Soviets created, see p278.

Kyrgyz Independence

Elections were held in traditional Soviet rubber-stamp style to the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet (legislature) in February 1990, with the Kyrgyz Communist Party (KCP) walking away with nearly all the seats. After multiple ballots a compromise candidate, Askar Akaev, a physicist and president of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences, was elected as leader. On 31 August 1991, the Kyrgyz Supreme Soviet reluctantly voted to declare Kyrgyzstan's independence, the first Central Asian republic to do so. Six weeks later Akaev was re-elected as president, running unopposed.

In the meantime, land and housing were at the root of Central Asia's most infamous 'ethnic' violence, between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 1990 around Osh and Özgön, a majority-Uzbek area stuck onto Kyrgyzstan in the 1930s (p334), during which at least 300 people were killed.

Kyrgyzstan's first decade of independence was characterised by extreme economic hardship. Between 1990 and 1996, industrial production fell by 64%, dragging the economy back to the levels of the 1970s when production was one of the lowest in the USSR. Only in 1996 did the economy stop shrinking.

Akaev initially established himself as a persistent reformer, restructuring the executive apparatus to suit his liberal political and

economic attitudes, and instituting reforms considered the most radical in the Central Asian republics.

The Tulip Revolution

By the early 2000s, Kyrgyzstan's democratic credentials were once again backsliding in the face of growing corruption, nepotism and civil unrest. The 2005 parliamentary elections were plagued by accusations of harassment and government censure. Demonstrators stormed governmental buildings in Jalal-Abad and civil unrest soon spread to Osh and Bishkek. On 24 March the relatively peaceful Tulip Revolution effectively overthrew the government amid bouts of looting and vandalism. President Akayev fled by helicopter to Kazakhstan and on to Moscow – subsequently resigning and becoming a university lecturer.

New presidential elections were held in July 2005 and the opposition leader and former prime minister, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, swept to victory, appointing Felix Kulov his prime minister.

Kyrgyzstan Today

Despite the fastest privatisation programme and the most liberal attitudes in Central Asia, the economy is still in bad shape. Unemploy-

ment (and particularly underemployment) is rife and the average monthly wage is currently about US\$55 in Bishkek, and less than half this in the countryside.

The Kyrgyz-Canadian gold-mining company Kumtor single-handedly produces 18% of the republic's GDP, making the republic very vulnerable to drops in the world price of gold. Still, the economy is getting better; growing by 7% in 2003 and 2004. Kyrgyzstan is still the only Central Asian member of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Kyrgyzstan's mountains effectively isolate the country's northern and southern population centres from one another, especially in winter. The geographically isolated southern provinces of Osh and Jalal-Abad have more in common with the conservative, Islamised Fergana Valley than with the industrialised, Russified north. Ancient but still-important clan affiliations reinforce these regional differences and in a recent survey, 63.5% of Kyrgyz people thought that north-south cultural divisions were the main destabilising factor within society.

Kyrgyzstan's southern Batken district remains at risk in terms of potential Islamic fundamentalist insurgency. In 1999 militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

GER TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

If your idea of 'roughing-it' is sleeping with the window open then visiting Kyrgyzstan may be a mistake. If, on the other hand, you don't mind sleeping in a sheep, you'll have a blast. Of course you don't actually sleep in a sheep, but it's pretty close. Yurts (*bosuy* in Kyrgyz, *kiiz-uy* in Kazakh and also known as gers in English) are made of wool, smell like mutton and can be found peeped all over grassy fields like giant mushrooms. They are also practical – warm in winter, cool in summer and relatively light and portable.

Yurts are made of multilayered felt (*kiyiz* or *kiiz*) stretched around a collapsible wooden frame (*kerege*). The outer felt layer is coated in waterproof sheep fat, the innermost layer is lined with woven mats from the tall grass called *chiy* to block the wind. Looking up, you'll see the *tyndyk*, a wheel that supports the roof (and which is depicted on Kyrgyzstan's national flag). Long woven woollen strips of varying widths, called *tizgych* and *chalgych*, secure the walls and poles. Start to finish, a yurt requires around three hours to set up or pull down if you are Kyrgyz and about three days for everyone else.

The interior is richly decorated with textiles, wall coverings, quilts, cushions, camel and horse bags, and ornately worked caskets. Floors are lined with thick felt (*koshma*) and covered with bright carpets (*shyrdaks* or *ala-kiyiz*), and sometimes yak (like cows but with bad hair) skin. The more elaborate the decoration, the higher the social standing of the yurt's owners.

Spending a night in a yurt is easy – Community Based Tourism (CBT; p277) can arrange authentic yurtstays, particularly in central Kyrgyzstan, from Suusamyr to Naryn. Nothing gets the nomadic blood racing through your veins like lying awake at night under a heavy pile of blankets, staring at the stars through the *shanrak* (the hole in the roof that allows air and light to enter and smoke from the fire to escape), wondering if wolves will come and eat your horse.

(IMU; based in Tajikistan) took four Japanese geologists hostage. Kyrgyzstan's Minister for Interior Security flew down to oversee the rescue operation and was himself promptly kidnapped. The Japanese were eventually freed but several locals were killed in the ensuing fighting.

Then, one year later, an Islamic group captured four American climbers. The Americans reportedly escaped with a well-timed tug of a rope that sent the terrorist leader plummeting to his death.

Although those conflicts set nerves jangling in Bishkek, Islamic fundamentalism is not officially seen as a serious threat. The US bombings in Afghanistan have largely pulled the rug from under the militants' feet, killing most of the IMU leadership and its Al-Qaeda-supplied support network.

CURRENT EVENTS

In the wake of the Tulip Revolution, little seems to have changed. President Bakiyev now finds himself faced with the same criticisms that he levelled at his predecessor – corruption, a refusal to initiate promised constitutional reform and a reluctance to curb his own presidential powers.

In November 2006, under growing pressure from thousands of demonstrators shouting for his resignation, Mr Bakiyev finally backed down, agreeing to a number of concessions that opposition leaders say will help fight corruption.

Bishkek's Manas Airport remains another contentious issue. The airport doubles as the country's main international hub and the United States Ganci Air Base. The opening

of a US military base at Manas Airport and the Russian airbase just down the road at Kant, highlights the strategic realignment of the republic and the heightened rivalries between the region's former and current superpowers in a post-9/11 Central Asia.

Certainly the lines of KC-135 tanker transport planes, C-130 cargo planes and the presence of a military base in a civilian airport creates a sobering impression on arrival. The base is used to aid aerial operations in Afghanistan and at the time of research the government was negotiating a hundredfold increase in rent to US\$200 million.

PEOPLE

There are about 80 ethnic groups in Kyrgyzstan; the principle ethnicities being Kyrgyz (66%), Uzbek (14%) and Russian (10%). Notable minorities include the Dungan, Ukrainian and Uyghur peoples. The Kyrgyz are outnumbered almost two to one by their livestock and about two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas.

Since 1989 there has been a major exodus of Slavs and Germans – more than 200,000 Russians and at least 75% of all Germans. At its peak in 1993, 130,000 people left Kyrgyzstan, of whom 90,000 were Russians. The emigration trend has slowed in recent years until the 2005 revolution, which triggered a 'second wave' of those seeking Russian citizenship. Most cite the dearth of job prospects and continued economic hardship as the main reason for leaving. Many fear that the steady stream of departing skilled workers and educated professionals will have dire effects on the economy.

THE KIDNAPPED BRIDE

Kyrgyz men have a way of sweeping a woman off her feet – off her feet and into a waiting car or even a taxi. Kidnapping is the traditional way young men find themselves a wife. Although the practice has been illegal since 1991 the custom is once again on the upswing. Some say it's a reassertion of national identity although many point to the rising cost of wedding celebrations and brides (Kyrgyz women command a 'bride price') and a well-executed abduction can dramatically slash wedding costs.

An old Kyrgyz adage foretells that tears on the wedding day bode for a happy marriage, and it is true, many marriages that begin this way turn out to be some of the most successful in rural Kyrgyzstan. Perhaps this explains why parents of kidnapped daughters consent to the forced marriage when consulted as part of the kidnapping process. If the girl is to escape, and some do, it takes a lot of determination and courage to withstand the tremendous amount of pressure that is brought to bear. For further information and video interviews, check out journalist Petr Lom's excellent report at www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/kyrgyzstan.

BLAZING SADDLES, FLYING FEATHERS

Nomadic sports are very popular in Kyrgyzstan and have seen a revival in recent years. The most spectacular of these, an all-out mounted brawl over a headless goat, is *kok boru*, also known as *ulak-tartysh* or *buzkashi* (p59). The Kyrgyz name means 'grey wolf', which reveals the sport's origins as a hunting exercise.

Kyz-kumay (kiss-the-girl) involves a man who furiously chases a woman on horseback in an attempt to kiss her. The woman gets the faster horse and a head start and, if she wins, gets to chase and whip her shamed suitor. Ah, young love. This allegedly began as a formalised alternative to abduction, the traditional nomadic way to take a bride.

Other equestrian activities in Kyrgyzstan include *at chabysh* (p310), a horse race over a distance of 20km to 30km; *jumby atmai*, horseback archery; *tiyin enmei*, where contestants pick up coins off the ground while galloping past; and *udarysh*, horseback wrestling.

Kok boru is often incorporated into Independence Day celebrations and other festivals and CBT (p277) arrange demonstrations upon request (5500som) if you give them a few days notice.

When not wrestling over dead livestock or being whipped by young girls the traditional nomad might take to the hills for a spot of eagle-hunting. Hunting with golden eagles is not to be confused with falconry, which in these parts is looked down upon as a pastime for children and delinquents.

A skilled hunter (*berkutchi*) and his bird typically go after foxes, badgers, rabbits and occasionally wolves. The capture and training of eagles takes three to four years and is a highly ritualised activity. The best time to see eagles in action is after their summer moult between October and February. Community-Based Tourism arrange demonstrations, particularly around Lake Issyk-Köl (Bokonbayevo, p312 or Kadjji-Sai, p311) although be warned, things end badly for the bunny.

Kyrgyz (with Kazakhs) in general, while probably the most Russified of Central Asian people, were never as deeply 'Leninised', judging by the ease with which they have turned away from the Soviet era. There has been none of the wholesale, hypocritical race to cleanse all Soviet terminology that afflicts Uzbekistan.

For more on the Kyrgyz people refer to p59.

RELIGION

Like the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz adopted Islam relatively late and limited it to what could fit in their saddlebags. Northern Kyrgyz are more Russified and less observant of Muslim doctrine than their cousins in the south (in Jalal-Abad and Osh provinces). One consequence of this is the high number of young women boasting hip-hugging jeans on the streets of Bishkek with nary a head scarf between them.

Dwindling communities of Russian Orthodox Christians are still visible, particularly in Bishkek and Karakol, both of which have Orthodox cathedrals.

ARTS Literature

Central Asian literature has traditionally been popularised in the form of songs, poems and stories by itinerant minstrels or bards, called

akyn in Kyrgyz (p276). Among better-known 20th-century Kyrgyz *akyns* are Togolok Moldo (real name Bayymbet Abdyrakhmanov), Sayakbay Karalayeve and Sagymbay Orozbekov.

Kyrgyzstan's best-known living author is Chinghiz Aitmatov (born 1928), whose works have been translated into English, German and French. Among his novels, which are also revealing looks at Kyrgyz life and culture, are *Djamila* (1967), *The White Steamship* (1970), *Early Cranes* (1975) and *Piebald Dog Running Along the Shore* (1978), the latter was made into a prize-winning Russian film in 1990.

In *The Day Lasts Longer Than a Century* (1980) two boys witness the arrest by the NKVD (*Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennih Del*; Interior Ministry) of their father, who never returns (Aitmatov lost his father in Stalin's purges and the loss of a father is a recurring theme in his work). *The Place of the Skull* (1986) confronted previously taboo subjects such as drugs and religion and was an early attack on bureaucracy and environmental destruction. *Djamila* and *The Day Lasts Longer Than a Century* are fairly easy to find in English.

MANAS

The *Manas* epic is a cycle of oral legends, 20 times longer than the *Odyssey*, which tells of the formation of the Kyrgyz people through

CRAFTY CARPETS

No craft smacks more of Kyrgyzstan than the quintessential nomadic felt rug called a *shyrdak*. *Shyrdaks* are pieced together from cut pieces of sheep's wool after weeks of washing, drying, dyeing and treatment against woodworm. The appliqué patterns are usually of a *kochkor mujuz* (plant motif), *teke mujuz* (ibex horn motif) or *kyal* (fancy scrollwork) bordered in a style particular to the region. Brightly coloured designs were introduced after synthetic dye became readily available in the 1960s, although natural dyes (made from pear and raspberry leaves, dahlia and birch root, among others) are making a comeback. Neutral-coloured *shyrdaks* are also easy to find and resist fading. In summer Kyrgyz women work together to hand stitch each felt piece into place eventually knocking out a beautiful carpet that will last for more than three decades.

The 'blurred' design of the *ala-kiyiz* (rug with coloured panels pressed on) is made from dyed fleece, which is laid out in the desired pattern on a *chiy* (reed) mat. The felt is made by sprinkling hot water over the wool, which is then rolled up and rolled around until the wool compacts.

Before you purchase a *shyrdak*, ensure that it's hand-made by checking for irregular stitching on the back and tight, even stitching around the panels. Also check the colour will not run (lick your finger and run lightly over the colours to see that they do not bleed). The best *shyrdaks* are said to be made around Naryn. There are women's *shyrdak* cooperatives in Bishkek and Kochkor and CBT coordinators can often put you in touch with *shyrdak* makers.

the exploits of a hero-of-heroes called Manas. Acclaimed as one of the finest epic traditions, this 'Iliad of the steppes' is the highpoint of a widespread Central Asian oral culture.

The *Manas* narrative revolves around Manas, the khan, or *batyr* (heroic warrior), and his exploits in carving out a homeland for his people in the face of hostile hordes. Subsequent stories deal with the exploits of his son Semety and grandson Seitek. Manas is of course strong, brave and a born leader; he is also, to an important extent, the embodiment of the Kyrgyz' self-image.

Manas in fact predates the Kyrgyz, in the same sense that Achilles or Agamemnon predate the Greeks. The stories are part of a wider, older tradition that have come to be associated with the Kyrgyz people and culture. The epic was first written down in the mid-19th century by the Kazakh ethnographer Shoqan Ualikhanov.

Akyns who can recite or improvise from the epics are in a class by themselves, called *manaschi*. Latter-day bards wear sequined costumes and recite short, memorised snippets of the great songs in auditoriums. Traditionally the illiterate bards would belt out their 24-hour long epics in yurts, to enthralled audiences for whom the shifting, artful improvisations on time-worn themes were radio, TV, rap music, performance poetry and myth rolled into one, but that tradition is now dead.

The end of the oral tradition was inevitable with the advent of literacy (though the Soviets

tried to pack it off early in the 1950s when there was a movement to criticise the epic as 'feudal'). Yet interest in *Manas* is on the rise. Books, operas, movies, comic books, and TV serials based on *Manas* are thriving.

Manas mania received an exponential boost when the Kyrgyz government and Unesco declared 1995 the 'International Year of *Manas*' and the '1000th Anniversary of the *Manas* Epos'. When a small, poor country spends US\$8 million (by some estimates) on celebrating an oral epic, one can be pretty sure it's not just because the government really digs rhyming verse. *Manas* has become, once again, a figure for the Kyrgyz to hang their dreams on. Legend has even assigned *Manas* a tomb, located near Talas and supposedly built by his wife Kanykey, where Muslim pilgrims come to pray.

Other Arts

Kyrgyzstan's Aktan Abdykalykov is a rising star of Central Asia cinema. His 1998 bitersweet coming-of-age *Beshkempir* (The Adopted Son) was released to critical acclaim and *Maimil* (The Chimp) received an honourable mention in Cannes in 2001. Both are well worth viewing.

Yak Born in Snow is a fascinating Soviet documentary of Kyrgyz yak herders, available for viewing at Yak Tours (p302) in Karakol.

Kyrgyz traditional music is played on a mixture of *komuz* guitars, a vertical violin known as a *kyl kyayk*, flutes, drums, mouth

harps (*temir komuz*, or *jygach ooz* with a string) and long horns.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Kyrgyzstan is a bit larger than Austria plus Hungary; 94% of the country is mountainous. The country's average elevation is 2750m with 40% over 3000m high and three-quarters of that under permanent snow and glaciers.

The dominant feature is the Tian Shan range in the southeast. Its crest, the dramatic Kokshal-Tau, forms a stunning natural border with China, culminating at Pik Pobedy (7439m), Kyrgyzstan's highest point and the second-highest peak in the former USSR. The Fergana range across the middle of the country and the Pamir Alay in the south hold the Fergana Valley in a scissor-grip.

In a vast indentation on the fringes of the Tian Shan, Lake Issyk-Köl, almost 700m deep,

never freezes due to its high salinity. Kyrgyzstan's only significant lowland features are the Chuy and Talas Valleys, adjacent to Kazakhstan. Its main rivers are the Naryn, flowing almost the full length of the country into the Syr-Darya in the Fergana Valley, and the Chuy along the Kazakhstan border.

Wildlife

Kyrgyzstan offers an annual refuge for thousands of migrating birds, including rare cranes and geese. The country is believed to have had the world's second-largest snow leopard population, although numbers are declining rapidly. Issyk-Köl and Sary-Chelek lakes are Unesco-affiliated biosphere reserves.

Environmental Issues

At the end of the Soviet era there were an estimated 14 million sheep in Kyrgyzstan. Since then flock numbers have been privatised and

COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

Thanks to several innovative Kyrgyz grass-root organisations, it is ridiculously easy for travellers to scramble over the cultural divide and rub shoulders with the locals.

Shepherd's Life and Community Based Tourism (CBT) are the two programmes you'll hear being bandied about most often and there is considerable overlap in the services they provide. In a nutshell, both connect tourists with a wider network of guides, drivers and families willing to take in guests, either in villages or *jailoos* (summer meadows), across the country. You can use the network of information offices to organise anything from a comfortable homestay to a fully supported horse trek. Because each office is independently run the level of service varies but standout CBT offices include the following:

Arslanbob (p331)
Bishkek (p282)
Jalal-Abad (p332)
Karakol (p302)
Kochkor (p316)
Naryn (p320)

Other CBT offices include Tamchy (p296), Bokonbayevo (p312), Kazarman (p322), Osh (p336), Talas (p328), Sary Moghul (p341), and Lake Sary-Chelek (p329) – see those entries for more details. Contact CBT Bishkek for details for their planned offices in Gulcha, Kerben and Batken.

Homestays are ranked from one to three edelweiss and generally cost around 250som to 350som per day for bed and breakfast and 100som per additional meal. Depending on the quality and availability of local restaurants, it is often cheaper to eat out. Horse hire is 400som to 500som per day and guides range from 400som to 1000som per day. A car and driver costs 9som to 10som per kilometre, though this is dependent on the price of fuel. It's worth picking up a copy of the *CBT Guidebook* (170som, or download it for free from www.cbtkyrgyzstan.kg) that lists each office's services, a description of local trips and useful town maps.

Shepherd's Life is cheaper than CBT, slightly less organised and has five coordinators, in Kochkor (p316), Jumgal (p318), Naryn (p320), At-Bashy (p324) and Jangy Talap (near Ak-Tal; p322).

For an overview of these organisations' aims and objectives, see p92.

divided. Economic hardship, a loss of effective management and a lack of governmental infrastructure have seen flocks numbers dwindle to about six million.

Individuals lack the means for covering shepherds' wages, meeting transport costs or maintaining infrastructure (eg bridges) that would allow these small flocks to travel to traditional summer *jailoos*. This in turn has resulted in serious undergrazing of mountain pastures leading to a succession of foreign plant invasions. Meanwhile pastures near villages are ironically overgrazed, leading to degraded fields prone to soil erosion.

Uranium for the Soviet nuclear military machine was mined in Kyrgyzstan (the Kyrgyz SSR's uranium sector earned the sobriquet 'Atomic Fortress of the Tian Shan'), and as many as 50 abandoned mine sites in Kyrgyzstan alone might now leak unstabilised radioactive tailings or contaminated groundwater into their surroundings. Independent Kyrgyzstan has closed most of the mines and institutes and begun to grapple with the environmental problems they created.

In 1998 almost 2 tonnes of cyanide and sodium hydrochloride destined for the Kumtor gold mine spilled into the Barskoön River and thence Issyk-Köl, reportedly leaving several people dead, hundreds seeking medical treatment, and thousands evacuated.

Kyrgyzstan's rivers offer vast hydropower potential, though so far this only fulfils about 25% of the requirements, and expanded development will inevitably collide with environmental considerations. The country's reserves of fresh water, locked up in the form of glaciers, remain its greatest natural resource although as these are shrinking providing plenty of water in the short term it's a double-edged sword with seemingly disastrous long-term effects.

FOOD & DRINK

Spicy *laghman* (noodle) dishes reign supreme, partly the result of Dungan (Muslim Chinese) influence. Apart from standard Central Asian dishes (p82), *beshbarmak* (literally 'five fingers', since it is traditionally eaten by hand) is a special holiday dish consisting of large flat noodles topped with lamb and/or horsemeat cooked in vegetable broth. *Kesme* is a thick noodle soup with small bits of potato, vegetable and meat. *Jarkop* is a braised meat and vegetable dish with noodles.

Hoshan are fried and steamed dumplings, similar to *manty* (stuffed dumplings), best right off the fire from markets. Horsemeat sausages known as *kazy*, *karta* or *chuchuk* are a popular vodka chaser, as in Kazakhstan.

In Dungan areas (eg Karakol or certain suburbs of Bishkek), ask for *ashlyanfu*, made with cold noodles, jelly, vinegar and eggs. Also try their steamed buns made with *jusai*, a mountain grass of the onion family, and *fyntyozi*, spicy cold rice noodles. *Gyanfan* is rice with a meat and vegetable sauce.

Kymys (fermented mare's milk), available in spring and early summer, is the national drink. *Bozo* is a thick fizzy drink made from boiled fermented millet or other grains. *Jarma* and *maksym* are fermented barley drinks, made with yeast and yogurt. *Shoro* is the brand name of a similar drink, available at most street corners in Bishkek. All four, and tea, are washed down with *boorsok* (fried bits of dough). *Kurut* (small balls of tart, dried yogurt) are a favourite snack.

Issyk-Köl honey is said to be the best in Central Asia, and locally made blackcurrant jam is a treat. Kids and elderly people in Cholpon-Ata sell strings of dried fish and you can buy larger smoked fish in the bazaars.

Tea is traditionally made very strong in a pot and mixed with boiling water and milk in a bowl before serving.

BISHKEK БИШКЕК

☎ 312 / pop 900,000 / elev 800m

Bishkek feels green – but not just because of the trees. Green because it's young, wet-behind-the-ears, racing to grow up and unsure of what it wants to become.

A cosmopolitan capital? It needs a heap more money for that. A dignified Silk Road legacy? Bishkek needs a tad more history. Little exists that predates WWII although Lenin is still here in his concrete overcoat (albeit recently demoted to a smaller square) and a larger-than-life Frunze still sits on a bronze horse facing the train station (though his name has been removed).

What's more, Bishkek seems small and bony like a teenager. There's not that much to it. It's yet to fill out. You can race around the museums and be back hanging at the bar, debating politics with the large contingent of American expats before your bar stool has

cooled. Yes, nothing gets the heart racing like a few vodka shots and a well-timed reference to the US military base at a civilian airport.

But it's not only high-octane alcohol that fuels debate and there is more than mountains that separate the capital from the more conservative south. Yearly street demonstrations (2004, 2005 and 2006), the spasmodic dosing of demonstrators with tear gas and a coup (2005) paints a troubling picture of this upstart capital but the reality is far more congenial. The only serious trouble you're likely to encounter is the Kyrgyz proclivity for Chinese food and karaoke. Dangerous stuff.

HISTORY

In 1825, by a Silk Road settlement on a tributary of the Chuy River, the Uzbek khan of Kokand built a little clay fort, one of several along caravan routes through the Tian Shan mountains. In 1862 the Russians captured and wrecked it, and set up a garrison of their own. The town of Pishpek was founded 16 years later, swelled by Russian peasants lured by land grants and the Chuy Valley's fertile black earth.

In 1926 the town, rebaptised Frunze, became capital of the new Kyrgyz ASSR. The name never sat well; Mikhail Frunze (who was born here) was the Russian Civil War commander who helped keep tsarist Central Asia in Bolshevik hands and hounded the *basmachi* rebellion into the mountains.

In 1991 the city became Bishkek, the Kyrgyz form of its old Kazakh name. A *pishpek* or *bishkek* is a churn for *kumys*. Numerous legends (some quaint, some rude) explain how it came to be named for a wooden plunger. Others conclude disappointingly that this was simply the closest familiar sound to its old Sogdian name, Peshagakh, meaning 'place below the mountains'. With the 4800m, permanently snowcapped rampart of the Kyrgyz Alatau range looming over it, the Sogdian name still fits.

ORIENTATION

Bishkek sits on the northern hem of the Kyrgyz Alatau mountains, an arm of the Tian Shan. Nineteenth-century military planners laid out an orderly, compass-oriented town and getting around is quite easy.

East–west Jibek Jolu prospektisi (Silk Road Ave), just north of the centre, was old

Pishpek's main street. Now the municipal axes are Chuy and parklike north–south Erkindik. The busiest commercial streets are Kiev and Soviet. At the centre yawns Ala-Too Sq, flanked by Panfilov and Dubovy (Oak) Parks. Street numbers increase as you head north or west.

Maps

Geoid (☎ 21 22 02; Room 4, 3rd fl, Kiev 107; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri) sells Bishkek city maps in Cyrillic, as well as trekking and 1:200,000 topo maps (from 150som). For more on maps see p346. The building is accessed through an unmarked door just west of DHL.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Fatboys (Chuy 104) Maintains a library where books can be borrowed for two weeks free of charge. If you are into bodice-ripping romance novels, you'll think you have died and gone to heaven.

Metro (☎ 21 76 64; Chuy 168A) Has a small, but fantastically eclectic selection of titles. Ask for the cabinets to be unlocked for unfettered browsing. Books cost the US jacket price plus US\$5.

The bookshop in the Dom Druzhby centre has the *Manas* epic in English along with a city walking map and the Hyatt Regency (p286) will flog you a *Herald Tribune* or *Time* for US\$7.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 103)

Fire service (☎ 101)

Police (☎ 102)

Internet Access

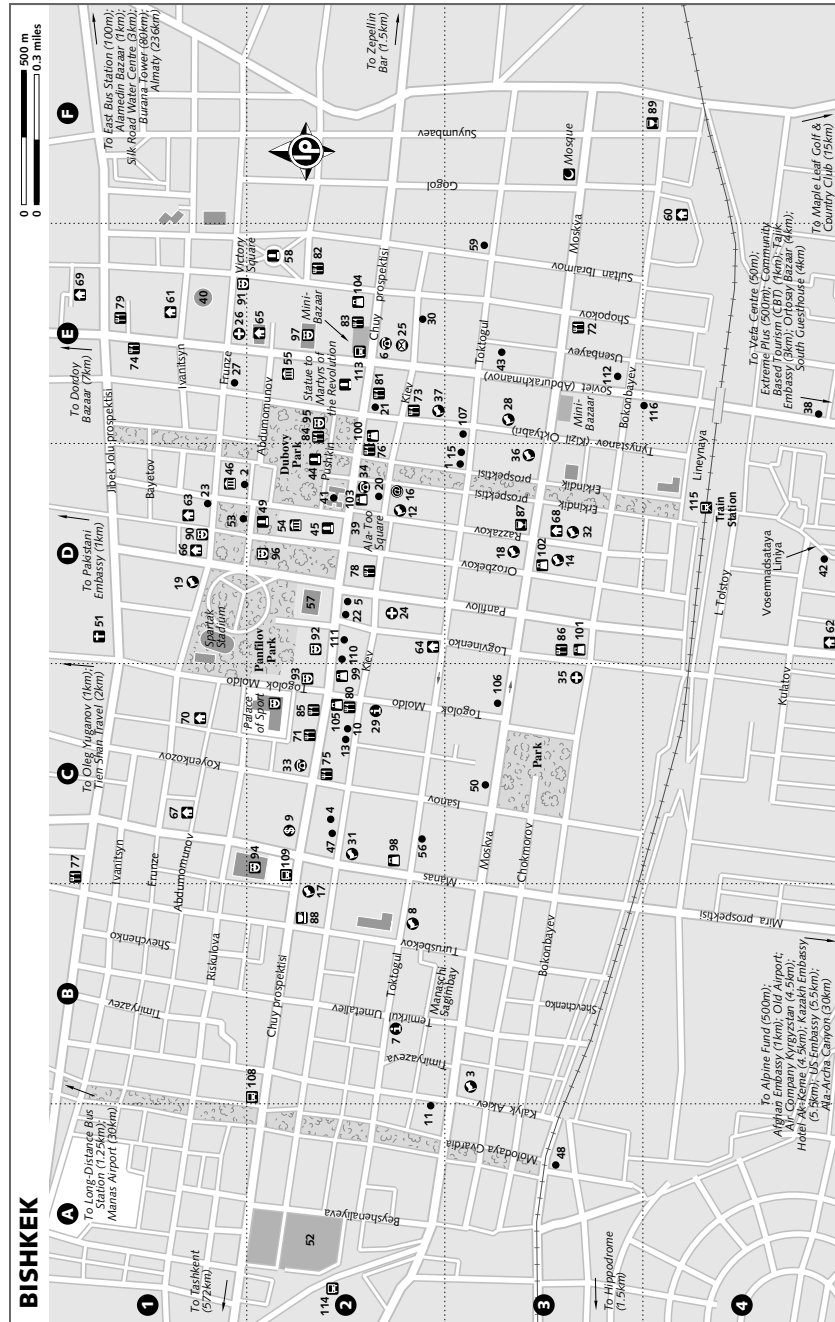
In-tel Internet (☎ 66 05 56; Kiev 92; per hr 30som; ☎ 8am–midnight) Also offers cheap internet phone calls.

Medical Services

Pharmacies are marked *darykhana* (Kyrgyz) or *apteka* (Russian) and there is a 24-hour one on the north side of the Hyatt; the **Metro-pol** (☎ 68 10 05; Soviet 340; ☎ 24hr).

Kyrgyz Republic Hospital (☎ outpatients 22 89 60, 24hr emergencies & hospital ambulance ☎ 26 69 16; Kiev 110) Probably the best bet for medical attention is also known as State Clinic No 2. Bring an interpreter.

Tsentr Semeinoi Meditsiny (Centre of Family Medicine; ☎ 66 06 44, 66 06 91; Bokonbayevo 144A) Some readers have recommended it. By Logvinenko



KYRGYZSTAN

BISHKEK

KYRGYZSTAN

Money

There are exchange desks all over Bishkek, including most hotels.

Demir Kyrgyz Bank (☎ 61 06 10; Chuy 245;

9am–noon & 1–4pm Mon–Thu, til 2.30pm Fri) Changes Amex travellers cheques for 3% and gives Visa and Maestro credit card advances for 2.5%.

Kazkommertsbank (Soviet 136; ☎ 9am–1pm, 2–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–4pm Sat) Has two ATMs outside and another by the left (west) exit of TsUM department store and outside Central Asian Travel. All accept foreign cards with

a 2% commission. This bank handles the payments for the Kazakh visa in US dollars.

Post

American Resources International (ARI; ☎/fax 66 00 77; bishkek@aricargo.com; Erkindik 35) Ships larger items if you are moving to/from Bishkek.

DHL (☎ 61 11 11; fax 61 11 13; Kiev 107)

FedEx (☎ 65 00 12; fax 65 01 28; Moskva 217)

Main post office (Soviet; ☎ 7am–8pm Mon–Sat,

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| American University in Central Asia.....2 | D1 | Ala-Too Square.....39 | D2 | Old Edgar.....84 E2 | |
| ATM.....(see 5) | | Asia Mountains.....(see 60) | | Santa Maria.....85 C2 | |
| ATM.....(see 104) | | Circus.....40 | E1 | Shanghai.....(see 82) | |
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| Celestial Mountains.....4 | C2 | Dostuck Trekking.....42 | D4 | | |
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| Central Telecom Office.....6 | E2 | Erkindik (Freedom) Statue.....44 | D2 | 2x2.....(see 75) | |
| Centre of Tourism Development of Silk Road.....7 | B2 | Erkindik Statue.....45 | D2 | Bar Navigator.....87 D3 | |
| Chinese Embassy.....8 | B2 | International Mountaineering Camp (IMC) Pamir.....47 | C2 | Metro.....88 B2 | |
| Demir Kyrgyz Bank.....9 | C2 | ITMC Tien-Shan.....48 | A3 | Steinbrau.....89 F4 | |
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| Kyrgyz Concept (Branch).....21 | E2 | Hotel Ak-Say.....61 | E1 | Asia Gallery.....100 E2 | |
| Kyrgyz Concept (Information).....22 | D2 | Hotel Alpinist.....62 | D4 | Kyrgyz Style.....101 D3 | |
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BIZARRE BISHKEK

There's plenty to do in Bishkek besides preparing for the next trek. After the must-see nearby sights of **Burana Tower** (p293) and **Ala-Archa Canyon** (p290) mix it up with locals down in **Osh Bazaar** (p284). A Barbie in a burka for your niece? An *ak kalpak* (a felt, occasionally tasselled, hat) for dad? They'll love it. Stuff your modesty and a towel in a day-pack and head to the **Zhirgal Banyan** (p284) to give yourself a sound thrashing with a birch branch – you naughty little nomad! Later that night stun the locals with your Mick Jagger 'unleashed' impersonation at one of the street-side karaoke stalls along Chuy prospektisi.

8am-7pm Sun) There is a separate mailroom for EMS (Express Mail Service), between the post and telecom offices.

Registration & Visas

Office of Visas & Registrations (OVIR; Kiev 58; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) If required, this is the place to register (see p346) and apply for visa extensions (400som).

Telephone & Fax

Central telecom office (cnr Soviet & Chuy; ☎ 7am-8.30pm) Also provides international fax service. There are smaller telephone offices on the corners of Chuy and Erkindik, and Chuy and Isanov.

Tourist Information

Centre of Tourism Development of Silk Road

(☎ 62 72 96; Toktogul 216, Apt 1) Sponsored by the Norwegian Government, it helps promote tourism. Trekking gear and tents are available to rent.

Community Based Tourism (CBT; ☎ 55 93 31; www.cbt.kyrgyzstan.kg; Gorky 58; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat, closed Sat in winter) Gives information on CBT groups across the country (see p277) and sells the *CBT Guidebook* (170som), which outlines services available at each office. Take minibus 180 that runs up Soviet and then turns east onto Gorky. The office is well signed, 1km along Gorky on the right. **Novinomad** (☎ 62 23 81; www.novinomad.com; Togolok Moldo 28) Has a noticeboard for contacting other travellers and is an invaluable source of regional information. Recommended.

Travel Agencies

The following agencies are starting to figure out what budget-minded individual travellers want.

Alpine Fund (☎ 54 24 99; www.alpinefund.org; apt 16, Mira 714) This nonprofit organisation, established to assist Kyrgyz youth, runs weekend hikes and climbs in Ala-Archa National Park, including overnight summit attempts on Peak Uchitel (4572m). It also rents trekking gear.

Celestial Mountains (☎ 21 25 62; www.celestial.com.kg; Kiev 131-4) British-run agency that specialises in the Torugart Pass but can also offer visa support and cultural tours. Runs a hotel in Naryn. Contact Ian Claytor.

Central Asia Tourism Corporation (CAT; www.cat.kg; Chuy 124; air tickets (☎ 66 36 65); tourism (☎ 66 36 64) Visa support, rental cars, air tickets, accommodation and inclusive tours.

Ecotour (☎ /fax 21 34 70; www.ecotour.kg; Moskva 145/1) Ecofriendly and flexible with budget demands. Stay in traditional yurts with solar-heated water, and small hydroelectric turbines at Temir Kanat, Ak-Sai, Tuura-Su, Kara-Talaa, Jeti-Ūghuz and Bosteri for €20 per night (includes three meals and horse riding). Contact English-speaking Elmira or German-speaking Zamira.

Glavtour (☎ 66 32 32; www.glavtour.kg; Toktogul 93) Books flights; the website lists airfares from Bishkek. Visa cards accepted.

Kyrgyz Concept (www.concept.kg); main office (☎ 66 13 31, fax 66 02 20; office@concept.kg; Razzakov 100); branch (☎ 90 08 66; Tynystanov 231); information (☎ 66 60 06; Chuy 126); air tickets (☎ 90 04 04; aero3@concept.kg; Kiev 69) Offers cultural programmes at the higher end of the travel spectrum. Can arrange visa support (US\$145 Uzbek visa, three weeks), Bishkek homestays (US\$36 to US\$48), horse trekking, cultural shows and can even put you in touch with a Kyrgyz costume designer. It is also a reliable international ticket agency. Credit cards accepted.

Novinomad (☎ 62 23 81; www.novinomad.com; Togolok Moldo 28) An excellent operator for cultural tours, Torugart trips and trekking and translating services. Can book CBT and yurt-camp accommodation across the country.

Maison du Voyageurs (☎ 66 63 30; Moskva 122, cnr with Orozbekov) Organises flexible, general-interest trips throughout Kyrgyzstan and neighbouring countries for small groups. French-speaking guides available.

Silk Road Water Centre (☎ /fax 28 41 42; www.rafting.com.kg; Musa Jalil 104, Bishkek 720051, contact Alexander Kandaurov) Specialists in white-water rafting, kayaking and fishing trips on the Chuy, Chong-Kemin, Kekemeren and Naryn rivers.

Local guides include **Amanbayev Zakir** (☎ 502 55 36 53; www.guide.mail333.com) and Nurdan of the South Guesthouse (see p285). Both lead personal tours, arrange transport and book accommodation nationwide. Nurdan also has extensive regional knowledge and will happily arrange local excursions and treks

to the more obscure of the canyons around Bishkek (p291).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bishkek smiles during the day but is neither safe nor well lit after dark. At this time, all the normal Central Asian security rules apply (p447). If you're out after dark, stick to main streets, avoid the parks and steer clear of the area around the train station.

Crooked plain-clothed policemen are a problem in Bishkek, particularly at Osh Bazaar and at the corner of Soviet and Moskva. They will demand your passport and try to look in your bag and search your money (palming some). Legally you are required to carry your passport at all times but it's always worth trying to give them only a copy. If your passport is at an embassy, then get the embassy to write this on a photocopy of your passport.

SIGHTS

Ala-Too Square

This sea of concrete ceased to be called Lenin Sq in 1991. Lenin enjoyed centre stage on his plinth until August 2003, when he was relegated to the square behind the museum and replaced by (yet) another statue of Erkindik (Freedom). The Kyrgyz flag in the square is lowered every day at dusk.

Sure, there are yurts, a mummy, carpets, embroidery and even open-air *balbals* (Turkic totemlike gravestones) in the **State Historical Museum** (adult/student 45/20som, camera 100som; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), but the highlight is the mural-cum-shrine to Lenin and the Revolution upstairs. Former US president Ronald Reagan is immortalised wearing a skull, astride a missile and grinning wildly. Nazi Germany is depicted as a rampaging bear while (surprise, surprise) Mother Russia

as a beautiful woman clutching a white dove. English and lighting is minimal.

The grand façades across Chuy prospektisi from Lenin are just that – façades, about 10m deep, erected in Soviet times in front of the venerable but unsuitably drab Ilbirs knitwear factory.

The unmarked marble palace full of chandeliered offices just west of the square, the **'White House'**, is the seat of the Kyrgyzstan government, including the president's office and the republic's parliament. Behind this is **Panfilov Park**, full of rusting rides and arcades.

The conspicuously older structure north-east of Ala-Too Sq at Pushkin 68 was the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz ASSR, declared in 1926. It's now home to the **Dom Druzhby** community centre for advocacy and self-help groups, as well as a drab zoology museum.

Beyond this is **Dubovy (Oak) Park**, full of strollers on warm Sundays, a few open-air cafés and some neglected modern sculpture, and funnily enough, century-old oaks. Where **Erkindik prospektisi** (Freedom Ave) enters the park, there is an open-air art gallery. Nearby is the Erkindik (Freedom) Statue, formerly a statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police.

State Museum of Fine Arts

This decaying museum (☎ 66 15 44; Soviet 196; adult/student 130/20som; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm), also called the Gapar Aitiev Museum of Applied Art, features Kyrgyz embroidery, jewellery, utensils, eye-popping felt rugs, works by local artists, and a startling collection of reproduction Egyptian and classical statues.

Frunze House-Museum

Is this thatched cottage really where the little Frunze played with his toy soldiers, or

MIKHAIL VASILIEVICH FRUNZE

Frunze was born in what was then Pishpek in 1885. After an early adulthood full of revolutionary excitement in Moscow, and numerous arrests, he eventually commanded the Red Guards who occupied the Moscow Kremlin in October 1917. He was a major player in the Russian Civil War, directing the defeat of the White forces of Admiral Kolchak in Siberia and the rout of General Wrangel in the Caucasus. It was Frunze who led the Bolshevik forces that seized Khiva and Bukhara in 1920, and pushed the *basmachi* (Muslim guerrilla fighters) out of the Fergana Valley.

Replacing Trotsky as War Commissar, Frunze introduced compulsory peacetime military service, and moulded the Red Army into a potent tool of the Revolution. After Lenin's death, he survived several mysterious auto accidents, but died a victim of Stalin's paranoia in 1925, during an officially ordered stomach operation.

just the Soviet way with history? In any case the meticulous two-storey **museum** (☎ 66 06 07; Frunze 364; admission 40som; 🕒 10am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) engulfing it – showcasing Frunze as a military and family man, plus the requisite posters, weapons, flags and statues – has itself become a piece of history.

Victory Square

This weedy plaza with an immense yurt-shaped **WWII monument**, erected on the 40th anniversary of the end of the war, sprawls across an entire city block. On cold evenings you might see a knot of young men passing the bottle and warming themselves at its eternal flame. On weekends it's the destination for an endless stream of wedding parties posing for photographs.

The nearby Circus, on Frunze, that once played to packed houses in Soviet times looks like a 1950s UFO that crash landed and never had the impetus to move again.

Russian Remnants

Among poignant reminders that there is still a Russian community here are the pretty, blue-steepled **Orthodox church** (Jibek Jolu), and an incongruous, well-preserved Russian-style **log house** (Moskva), west of Togolok Moldo (now the Ecotour office).

Markets

The city has three daily farmers markets, all fairly distant from the centre. **Osh bazaar**, 3km to the west on Chuy, though not very colourful, offers a glimpse of Kyrgyz and Uzbeks from the more conservative south of the republic. Produce is sold inside the main bazaar and all around the outside of the complex. There is a separate clothes market south of the main produce bazaar. To get there take trolleybus 14 on Chuy, bus 20 or 24 on Kiev, or 42 from Soviet.

Smaller markets include the **Alamedin bazaar**, 2.5km to the northeast (trolleybus 7 or 9 from TsUM, return by bus 20 or 38), and **Ortosay Bazaar**, 6km to the south (trolleybus 12 on Soviet). All are open daily but are biggest on weekends.

Dordoy Bazaar (nicknamed Tolchok, which means 'jostling crowd') is a huge weekend flea market of imported consumer goods and junk about 7km north of the centre. You might strike gold with the occasional North Face jacket here. Buses 185, 132, 25 and 200

run to Dordoy from the northern corner of Soviet and Chuy.

Baths

Buy tickets for the **Zhirgal Banya** (cnr Sultan Ibraimov & Toktogul; bath 55som, Russian/Finnish sauna 55/60som; 🕒 8am-9pm) from the *kassa* (ticket office) around the side. Old ladies sell birch twigs outside the baths for those into a bit of self-flogging.

ACTIVITIES

A number of agencies in Bishkek organise a range of activities in the region.

Trekking & Mountaineering

Apart from the companies listed below, many of the travel agencies (p282 also offer trekking. For information on likely trekking routes near Bishkek, see p290.

Ak-Sai (☎ 54 42 77; www.ak-sai.com, www.basecamp.kg.com; Soviet 65) Provides trekking, mountaineering, biking, heli-skiing and visa support. It operates base camps at Inylchek and Pik Lenin, and the Red Fox camping store (p289).

Asia Mountains (☎ 69 40 73; www.asiamountains.co.uk; Lineynaya 1A) A well-organised agency charging US\$25 to US\$55 per person per day, depending on the programme. Can get border permits for the central Tian Shan, even if you aren't trekking with them. Runs a base camp at Achik Tash and a guesthouse in Bishkek (opposite).

Dostuck Trekking Ltd (☎ 42 74 71, ☎ /fax 54 54 55; www.dostuck.com.kg; Vosemnadsataya Liniya 42-1) Offers ascents to peaks, including base camps near Khan Tengri, Pobedy and Lenin as well as less specialised, fixed-date treks including yurt camps in the Sussamyr Valley and Tash Rabat. Can arrange helicopter transport and border permits.

Edelweiss (☎ 28 07 88; www.edelweiss.elcat.kg; Usenbayev 68/9) Trekking, mountaineering, heli-skiing, horse tours, ski trips and visa support. Contact Slava Alexandrov.

International Mountaineering Camp Pamir (IMC Pamir; ☎ 66 04 69; www.imcpamir.netfirms.com; Apt 30, Kiev 133) Trekking and mountaineering programmes and operates the Achik Tash base camp at the foot of Peak Lenin. Contact Bekbolot Koshoev.

ITMC Tien-Shan (☎ 65 12 21; www.itmc.centralasia.kg; Molodaya Gvardia 1A) Competent adventure-travel operator offering package and piecemeal help, including visa support; mountaineering, with base camps at Khan Tengri, Achik Tash (Pik Lenin) and Koh-i-Samani (Kommunizma); trekking; heli-skiing; mountain biking; and crossing the Trogg. Not to be confused with its former partner at Tien-Shan Travel.

Tien-Shan Travel (☎ /fax 27 05 76; www.tien-shan.com; Sherbakov 127) Ex-cartographers with expedition

gear and a menu of set group tours into the mountains, but unaccustomed to walk-in clients. Contact Vladimir Birukov.

Top Asia (☎ /fax 21 16 44; www.topasia.kg; Toktogul 175) Offers trekking, mountaineering and horse riding.

Other Activities

Nor does the fun stop with just walking amid the mountains. It is also possible to ride through, raft down, climb over, ski on or even just picnic at these mountains. Most Bishkek travel agencies (p282) and CBT (p277) can arrange horses, local yurtstays and guides.

For the low down on skiing see p292 or for white-water rafting options see p293. Contact the travel agencies (p282, for more information on the other activities. Some of the trekking companies listed (opposite and p282 also organise these activities.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Once upon a time, on summer Sundays, you might have seen traditional Kyrgyz horse-back games at the Hippodrome, southwest of the centre. Lately the best you can expect around Bishkek are exhibition games during the **Nooruz festival** (Navrus; 21 March; p345) and on **Kyrgyz Independence Day** (31 August).

SLEEPING Budget

South Guesthouse (☎ 57 26 23, 95 87 30; www.geocities.com/south_gh; 4th fl Aaly Tokombaev 31B; dm US\$2) This backpacker crash pad is waaaay down in the extreme southern suburbs (8th *microrayon*); you should most definitely call in advance, as it does fill up. It's essentially a two-person apartment converted into a dorm room for 10, so it may be too commune-like for some. The travellers' book is full of useful tips. Take minibus 232, 252 or 150, or trolleybus 6 or 3 and get off when the bus turns off Soviet. From the bus stop, cross the road, go into the first gap between apartment blocks, turn left and go in the second door on the left. To gain access, press 135 simultaneously and pull the door. A taxi to/from the centre costs 80som. Nurdan, the owner, offers an airport pickup (330som) and is a knowledgeable guide for off-the-beaten-track destinations.

Hotel Ak-Say (☎ 68 19 06; Ivanitsyn 117; s/d 187/374som) Slowly decaying but a cheap, bearable alternative to staying in a dorm if you don't mind common squat toilets and cold-water basins (a hot shower is 15som). The

neighbourhood behind the Circus is a bad one so be careful at night.

Sabyrbek's B&B (☎ 62 13 98; sabyrbek@mail.ru; Raz-zakov 21; dm/s200/300som) Sabyrbek offers beds and meals (100som; these are social events) in his ramshackle house. It's a friendly place – it needs to be – there's only one shower. The cat's called Nicole Kidman and the dog bites. Unfortunately Sabyrbek's brothers like a drink – and they don't do it alone. The location is great; look for an unmarked gate opposite the German embassy, next to a kioski.

Sakura Guesthouse (☎ 66 63 26; kobu-hikita@hotmail.com; Michurina 38; dm/d 200/500som) This new cheapie is already proving popular with its reasonably convenient location and crash-pad atmosphere. Beds are in six-bed dorms – one with an attached shower and sauna. Bathroom facilities are either shared with the family inside their home or by way of an outdoor pit toilet. Look for the small signs pointing the way from Soviet, past the Jibek Jolu intersection.

Hotel Sary-Chelek (☎ 66 26 27; Orozbekov 87; d 600som) Reports vary but some complain of flooded bathrooms and Soviet-era beds. Check that the door locks, and ignore the gurgling loo.

International School of Management & Business (☎ 62 31 07; fax 66 36 14; Panfilov 237; d 800som, pol-lux 1260som) Double rooms share a toilet and shower (hot water most of the time) with one other double and are clean, comfortable and soulless. The hotel is also known as the Salima.

Rental apartments and private homestays can be arranged through NoviNomad (p282), Dostuck Trekking (opposite) and Kyrgyz Concept's main office (p282) for around US\$10 to US\$25 per person per night.

Midrange

Radison Guesthouse (☎ 66 37 85; Abdumomunov; d US\$25; 🍷) This unsigned guesthouse (behind pink walls and a green gate) is run by a motherly manager and her son. The twin rooms are spotlessly clean with a small en suite and prices includes breakfast.

Hotel Semetei (☎ 21 83 24; Toktogul 125; d 1200-1500som, q 1760som) Rickety lifts take you to large, sunny rooms, each with fridge, TV and small hot-water bathroom. The two-roomed quad is excellent value.

our pick **Asia Mountains Guest House** (☎ 69 02 35; www.asiamountains.co.uk; Lineinaja 1A; s/d/tw US\$36/42/48; 🍷) Trekking groups love this clean, fresh lodge, and with good reason. Guests have access to a

kitchen and a nice communal seating area ideal for swapping climbing stories. The travel agency of the same name is in the basement. The guest-house is on the outskirts, tucked down an alley by the railway line. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Alpinist (☎ 44 15 22; Panfilov 113; s/d US\$36/48) Looking like a misplaced prop from *The Sound of Music* this altitudinous-themed hotel is about 30 minutes by foot from the city centre. Facilities include a restaurant, climbing wall, conference room and transport to local ski fields.

Top End

Hotel Ak-Keme (☎ 63 25 49; Mira 93; s/d US\$90/120; 📶 📺) Formally known as the Pinara, this Turkish-built, four-star hotel saw the original Turkish owners retake their investment by force after loans were defaulted on during the 2005 revolution. Exciting stuff. There is a Turkish sauna, outdoor pool (nonguests 500som), casino, 11th-floor open-air terrace restaurant and tennis court but poorly trained staff. Ask for a balcony with a mountain (southern) view. Breakfast is included.

Silk Road Lodge (☎ 66 11 29; www.silkroad.com.kg; Abdumamunova 229; s/d €74/85, deluxe €90, ste €102; 📶 📺) Run by the Celestial Mountains travel agency, rooms are equipped with everything (iron, fridge, hairdryer, kettle and satellite TV) but style. None the less it's a good option. There's a small heated plunge pool and live music on the weekends. Travellers cheques and credit cards accepted.

Hyatt Regency (☎ 66 12 34; www.bishkek.regency.hyatt.com; Soviet 191; s/d US\$275, lux d US\$320, ste US\$560; lux ste \$1060, plus 20% tax, discounts available; 📶 📺) Five stars make this the plushiest pad in town although the décor is somewhat schizophrenic with the calming, natural colours at odds with the peacock-bright *shyrdaks* (felt carpets). Facilities include the Crostini Restaurant, Opera Lounge, the @191 bar, an outdoor pool (nonguests 900som), fitness club and the obligatory casino. Breakfast is a cheeky US\$25 extra.

EATING

Most restaurants add a 10% service charge and a few cheeky blighters even exhort extra for background music.

Cafés & Chaikhanas

Astana Café (Kiev; mains 30som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Has a great atmosphere and cheap Uyghur food, including chicken shashlyk (20som) and

tasty salads. At night the place is jumping and there's a small cover charge for the (for once) decent live music.

Nayuz Café (Kiev; ☺ lunch & dinner) Is next door and similar to the Astana, with a large selection of vodka.

Chaikhana Jalal-Abad (☎ 61 00 83; cnr Kiev & Togolok Moldo; mains 35-85som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Has pleasant bamboo huts, cordial staff and, as the name suggests, serves up southern specialities such as *larzuro* (fried beef and vegetables), salads and shashlyk.

our pick Café Faiza (☎ 66 47 37; libek Jolu; mains 30-100som; ☺ lunch & dinner) It's a wildly popular Kyrgyz restaurant in the north of town that offers high-quality local dishes at reasonable prices. You won't get near the place at lunch.

Labyrinth Café (Chuy; mains 30-180som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Cheap eats and cheap beer can be found next door to TsUM at this open-air café serving Central Asian dishes such as Kazakh-style ribs and *beshbarmak* (flat noodles with a meat broth). Find a spot under the willows or umbrellas and settle in for some serious people-watching.

Café Lusfu (☎ 62 27 88; Kiev 77; mains 80som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Has filling and delicious Chinese meals served with a dubious disco, passionate dancing and heart-felt karaoke.

Bishkek has Central Asia's best *samsas* (samosas), sold hot out of miniovens all around town for around 10som each. The chicken or cheese ones are generally the best.

Several fast-food stands around town sell dangerous-looking doner kebabs (*gamburgers*) for around 15som.

Restaurants

Fatboys (☎ 28 73 50; Chuy 104; ☺ 8am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-10pm Sun; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; mains 50-120som, minimum charge 50som) A prime foreigners' hang-out – especially at breakfast with fresh juices, fruit teas, hash browns, bacon, eggs, yogurt, muesli and pancakes. If only the staff weren't so morose.

Bakit Restaurant (☎ 29 64 04; Soviet 214; meat mains 120som, veg mains 50som; ☺ lunch & dinner) The place to go if you have a hunger – it has decent-sized servings. The menu has been incorrectly translated so you don't always get what you think you ordered. It's worth the gamble.

Café Mazai (☎ 66 50 81; Soviet 199; salads 50som, mains 100-130som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Hop down the stairs into a faux cave, an indubitable burrow of rabbit specialities. The English menu details

such dishes as 'fillet of rabbit' and the 'rabbit juicy' along with more conventional fare.

Old Edgar (☎ 66 44 08; mains 85-160som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Choose from a good selection of Russian salads, fish (perch with mushrooms) and pizza in what feels like an underground, intimate Bavarian lodge. The après-ski vibe is reinforced by live music and a good bar. It's on the west side of the Russian Drama Theatre.

Bombay Restaurant (☎ 62 51 15; Chuy 110; meat mains 170-225som, veg mains 110-150som; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serves everything subcontinental, from vegetable *thalis* to *masala* curries with a sizeable side-order of cheesy décor.

Santa Maria (☎ 21 2484; Chuy 217; mains 110-250som; ☺ lunch & dinner) Anyone who has ever tried ordering Turkish diners in Russian will appreciate the picture menu at this upscale place. There are also a few European and Japanese dishes thrown in for good measure. Our eyes were on the *nis ratatoly* (lamb chops with shredded eggplant, potato and rice). Visa cards accepted.

Adriatico Paradise (☎ 21 76 32; Chuy 219; mains 200-300som; ☺ lunch & dinner) The excellent Italian food here is prepared by a genuine Italian chef, with imported ingredients and Chianti wines. A 30cm pizza costs 200som and pasta dishes run at around 225som. Lunch deals (pasta and salad) cost 140som.

Side by side on the south side of Victory Sq, are three decent Chinese restaurants: the friendly **Khuadali** (☎ 0512-280418; Ogonbayev; mains 120som; ☺ lunch & dinner), the popular **Shanghai** (☎ 68 14 12; Ogonbayev; mains 120som; ☺ lunch & dinner) and the slightly cheaper **Kontinental** (☎ 28 04 11; Ogonbayev; mains 100som; ☺ lunch & dinner).

Self-Catering

Ak Emir Bazaar (cnr Moskva & Shopokov) A great place for do-it-yourselfers, with *samosas*, roast chicken, pickled Korean salads, honey, buckwheat of blackcurrants and *piroshki* (Russian-style pies) – plus fruit and vegetables.

Beta Stores (Chuy 150) You can get everything from baklava to bottled *kymyz* (24som) in the most popular supermarket in town. Trekkers will find the soup mixes useful.

Tekco Supermarket (Logvinenko 21; ☺ 24hr) A small, but well-stocked store. There is a bakery and Western-style meat and dairy chillers.

DRINKING

Remember, in Bishkek you are never far from a shot of vodka. For those too busy to actually go inside a bar, most street stalls sell 'kiosk

shots' (also known as juice grams) of vodka or cognac for 5som a nip.

The following places also serve excellent food.

Steinbräu (☎ 29 38 81; Gertse 5; 0.4L draught beer 40-52som) The German-style pilsner and recommended dark beer (Salvator) is brewed on-site here and is the main draw. The round tables and kids' play area are great for groups and families. Georgian wines and a full menu of German food (mains 175som), from sausages to pretzels, adds to the Munich beer-hall vibe. For added punch try the beer cocktails (Cologne lager and Flagman vodka).

Metro (☎ 21 76 64; Chuy 168A; beer 50-70som; ☺ 1-9pm) With international sports parading across a large-screen TV and American rock and pop belting from the speakers, the Metro provides expats with a slice of American and pizza in one handy package. Add this to the on-site bookshop (p279) and the Bar and Grill restaurant (mains 100som to 150som) and it is easy to see why this is one of the most popular Westerner hang-outs in town.

2X2 (☎ 21 24 97; cnr Isanova & Chuy; beer 60som, cocktails 70-400som) Imported grappa and coffee draw the faithful to this chic Italian-run pastel-and-chrome bar. Visa cards accepted.

Bar Navigator (☎ 66 51 51; Moskva 103; 1L beer 60-70som) A stylish spot where embassy workers shell out 100som for a gin and tonic or 60som for a cappuccino. The good live music makes it a classy place for a date. It also serves great appetisers and vegetarian meals.

ENTERTAINMENT Theatres & Concert Halls

Philharmonia (☎ 21 92 92; Chuy 210, by Belinsky) Features Western and Kyrgyz orchestral works and the occasional Kyrgyz song-and-dance troupe, but you may need a local person to identify these from the playbills. In front of the Philharmonia is a statue of the legendary hero Manas slaying a dragon, flanked by his wife, Kanykey, and his old adviser, Bakayn. The *kassa* is on the west side.

State Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 66 18 41; Soviet 167) Opposite the State Museum of Fine Arts, classical Western as well as local productions play in this elegant building to half-empty halls. Check the billboards outside for current productions.

State Academic Drama Theatre (☎ 21 69 58; Panfilov 273) On the east side of Panfilov Park, this is the place for popular Kyrgyz-language works,

more often than not written by Chinghiz Aitmatov, Kyrgyzstan's premier man of words.

Russian Drama Theatre (☎ 22 86 30; Tynystanov, Dubovy Park) For classics in Russian.

The Jetigen and Samaa ensembles and Ordo Sakhna folk troupe are also good to see. Ask NoviNomad (p282) about upcoming concerts.

Other Entertainment

Bishkek nightclubs seem to attract a middle-aged, mainly male clientele who are in town for 'biznez' and a good time. There's also bowling, billiards and golf.

Zepellin Bar (☎ 283492; Chuy 43; cover 50som; ☎ 10pm-5am) The best of the lot with Russian rock bands playing to a young crowd most nights. It's 2km east from TsUM; a taxi costs 70som.

Golden Bull (☎ 62 01 31; Chuy 209; foreigners/Kyrgyz men free/200som, beer 60som; ☎ 10pm-5am) The place attempts to please everyone with its blend of American, Russian, Kyrgyz and Turkish mix of pop and R&B. The floorshow (Thursday to Saturday) features skimpily clad male and female dancers (read: strippers).

Moscow Disco (☎ 21 39 05; Togolok Moldo 7, women/men 150/200som; ☎ 10pm-5am) Consists of an outside marquee-covered bar and windowless rooms behind fluorescent orange doors. Play Station games on a large plasma TV cost 40som per hour.

Galaxia (☎ 29 75 13; cnr Frunze & Shopokov) Offers ground floor bowling (per game before/after 6pm 140/190som, for children 90/140som) and an upstairs disco, **XO** (☎ noon-3am; women/men 300/400som).

You can play pool for 80som an hour in the **billiards club** (☎ 22 83 42; cnr Orobekov & Frunze), underneath the Consul Restaurant.

Maple Leaf Golf & Country Club is Kyrgyzstan's first nine-hole golf course, southeast of Bishkek near the village of Kara Jigach.

SHOPPING

Bishkek has the country's best collection of souvenirs and handicrafts, though you can often find individual items cheaper at their source (eg *shyrdaks* in Naryn, hats in Osh). For details on markets, see p284.

TsUM (☎ 29 27 94; Chuy 155) This state-run department store is surprisingly well stocked with a photo shop (digital!) and a large selection of made-for-tourist postcards and souvenirs on the 2nd floor. It sells pirated CDs and DVDs on the 3rd floor.

There is also a cluster of camera shops on Chuy prospektisi around Ala-Too Sq including **Pro Photo** (Chuy) that develops digital photos (7som per print).

The **Vefa Centre** (cnr Soviet & Gorky) will transport you to an American-style, air-conditioned mall, stocking Western brands at Western prices. The cinema on the 3rd floor screens Hollywood blockbusters dubbed in Russian (180som).

Artwork

Asia Gallery (☎ 62 45 05; Chuy 108; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat) Features modern Kyrgyz art, with some artists' workshops in the yard out the back.

Sailmaluu Tash Art Gallery (Pushkin 78; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sat) On the north side of Dom Druzhby, this place sells interesting but pricey pottery.

Stroll along the covered gallery in Dubovy Park to see local artists selling woodcarvings, oil paintings and charcoal portraits most afternoons.

Carpets

Kyrgyz Style (Kyrgyz Korku; ☎ 62 12 67; www.kyrgyzstyle.kg; Apt 12, Bokonbayev 133) A nonprofit organisation that sells high-quality *shyrdaks*, *ala kiyiz* (felt rugs featuring coloured panels), hats, bags and slippers to support social development in Kyrgyzstan. It's on the ground floor, accessed from the back of the apartment block.

Asahi Ecological Art & Handicraft (☎ 66 57 10; info@asahikyrgyz.com; Chuy 136; credit cards 10% surcharge) Not necessarily the cheapest store in town but the carpets, kilims and *shyrdaks* here are beautiful, top-quality pieces. Those nomads sure do know how to cut a rug.

Another place to look for *shyrdaks* is in the souvenir shops in the State Historical Museum.

Handicrafts

You can find Kyrgyz men's hats – the familiar white felt *ak kalpak* or the fur-trimmed *tebetey* – for sale in TsUM or, much cheaper, in the north building at Osh Bazaar.

There are some gimmicky souvenirs in the cabins in front of Beta Stores, also near Ala-Too Sq and opposite Panfilov Park on Chuy. All sell jewellery, wooden soldiers (Manas and company), Kyrgyz handicrafts and the odd *shyrdak*.

Antique Shop (☎ 62 19 10; http://alwian.host.net.kg; Manas 47; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri, until 3.30pm

Sat) An Aladdin's cave of Soviet, Kyrgyz and Russian antiques, strong on coins and memorabilia. Visa cards accepted.

Maison du Voyageurs (☎ 66 63 30; Moskva 122, cnr Orobekov) A wide selection of crafts from all over Kyrgyzstan, all marked with prices, the artist and the region they come from. The entrance is around the back and marked 'CATIA'.

Tumar Art Salon (☎ 21 26 53; Togolok Moldo 36) Sells high-quality, high-priced embroidery. Credit cards accepted.

Outdoor Supplies & Cycle Parts

Extreme Plus (☎ 97 51 07; Gorki 41) Has a good selection of outdoor equipment including bicycle components, trekking supplies, skis, tents and gas stoves. It's open all weekend in winter for ski and snowboard rental (US\$15 per day).

Red Fox (☎ 54 42 33; Soviet 65) Sells and rents mountain bikes (600som per day), camping supplies, mountaineering equipment, and cycle parts.

Do you have a sloppy head or need your bearings greased? Contact local cycle specialist **Oleg Yuganov** (☎ 67 09 74; Serova 149), who has helped many stranded cyclists get back in the saddle. He works irregular hours from his home, north of the centre. Phone first.

Outdoor clothing can be bought at the North Face store on the 2nd and 3rd floors of the Beta Stores (p287).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air
For spectacular trips by Yak-40, between the mountain tops and the clouds to Fergana Valley try one of the following national carriers.

Air Company Kyrgyzstan (AC Kyrgyzstan, formerly Alтын Air; ☎ 54 58 15; www.altynaire.kg; Mira 95) flies several times a day to Osh (US\$40 to US\$50), twice weekly to Batken (US\$48) and thrice weekly to Jalal-Abad (US\$40 to US\$50). **Esen Air** (☎ 66 34 82; esenair@yandex.ru; Chuy 130) flies every Thursday and Sunday to Ürümqi, China (US\$182) via Osh (US\$50).

Kyrgyzstan Airlines (☎ 62 21 23; Soviet 129) flies to Jalal-Abad and Osh daily. Both cost between US\$40 and US\$50.

AIRLINE OFFICES

The following international airline offices in Bishkek are useful for reconfirming or changing dates of an existing flight but are

not the cheapest places to book international tickets:

Aeroflot (☎ 62 09 76; Moskva 121)

British Airways (☎ 66 09 00; fax 66 08 68; Toktogul 93)
China Southern (formerly Xinjiang Airlines; ☎ 66 46 68; Chuy128/3) Can book Ürümqi-Kashgar tickets.

KLM – Royal Dutch Airlines (☎ 66 15 00; fax 66 34 50; Toktogul 93)

Lufthansa (☎ 66 56 00; Hyatt Regency, Soviet 19)

Turkish Airlines (☎ 66 00 08; thyfru@elcat.kg; Soviet 136, cnr Bokonbayev)

Uzbekistan Airways (☎ 21 48 63; uzb-air@elcat.kg; Kiev 107)

For details of international flights and fares see p348. For booking airline tickets see Kyrgyz Concept, Central Asia Tourism or Galvtour (p282).

Bus & Shared Taxi

The west (*zapadny*) or long-distance bus station is the place for catching long-distance buses and shared taxis; get there via bus 7 on Kiev, bus 35 or 48 or minibus 113 or 114 from Jibek Jolu, or trolleybus 5 on Manas.

Prowling around the periphery of the bus station are the shared-taxi and private-car drivers, poised to pounce the moment they spy you. Battle past the drivers to the cheaper, but less comfortable, long-distance minibuses. Further still is the near-empty terminal and what remains of the country's bus network.

On the bus station's upper floor are 21 ticket booths, all closed bar one and the station's only English sign – 'The disables [sic] soldiers and participants in the Great Patriotic War are served in the first place'. There's an information office next to counter 21 and a 24-hour exchange here too. Don't trust the schedule board.

Morning buses depart to Karakol (195som, 8½ hours) stopping at Cholpon-Ata (130som) and most places in between. There is sometimes a single daily bus to Naryn (175som) and At-Bashy (195som) at 7am. Other infrequent destinations include Kochkor (125som), Bokonbayevo (130som) and Almaty in Kazakhstan (250som). The bus to Tashkent in Uzbekistan (285som) requires a Kazakh transit visa.

The private minivans offer better value or, to ride in comfort, wedge yourself into a shared taxi. To hire the whole car, offer to pay for all four seats.

Minivans and shared taxis leave when full throughout the day. Prices fluctuate with

petrol costs and seasonal variations. The per seat fares for minibuses/shared taxis include: Karakol (250/400som), Cholpon-Ata (150/300som), Kochkor (200/250som to 300som), Naryn (250/350som to 450som), At-Bashy (300/450som), Bokombayev (200/250som to 300som), Tamchy (150/250som to 300som), Balykchy (120/200som) and a seat to Almaty in a minivan is 250som.

For Osh, ramshackle minibuses (600som) and private cars (600som to 1200som) leave from here and at the Osh Bazaar bus stand. The trip takes around 15 hours depending on the road and vehicle.

The Osh Bazaar bus stand also has local buses to destinations west such as Sokuluk, Tash-Bulak, Kashka-Suu and Chong-Tash. Buses 160, 169 and 177 go several times a day to Kashka-Suu, for Ala-Archa National Park; inquire at the ticket office at the entrance to the bus stand.

The east (*vastotshny avtovaksal*) bus station is for regional points east such as Kant, Tokmak, Chong-Kemin, Kemin, Kegeti and Issyk-Ata.

Train

Trains 17 and 27 run four times a week from Bishkek to Moscow (from 3900som) via Almaty. It is also possible to travel to Tashkent by rail but all trains pass through Kazakhstan.

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Manas airport (☎ 60 31 09), 30km northwest of the centre, doesn't quite live up to its poetic namesake and now doubles as an American air-force base. Bus 153 (15som, one hour) runs from the old airport by the Pınara Hotel, but the closest it gets to the centre is a stop in front of the Philharmonia. Marshrutka 325 runs from Osh Bazaar to the airport and marshrutnoe 380 will drop you at the corner of Chuy and Molodiya Guardia (20som).

A taxi between the airport and the centre costs around 350som. Ekspres Taxis at the airport can arrange a reliable taxi. Most flights arrive in the middle of the night playing nicely into the hands of the taxi touts. Haggle.

Bus

Municipal trolleybuses cost 3som, payable as you disembark at the front or to the conductor. At rush hour these are so crammed that you must plan your escape several stops

ahead. Ford Transit minibuses (5som) are generally better, as they are faster and less crowded.

Some useful minibus routes:

No 110 From Osh bazaar, along Moskva to Soviet and then south.

Nos 113, 114 From the west (long-distance) bus station, down Jibek Jolu to Alamedin Bazaar.

Nos 125, 126 From Soviet (opposite the Orient International restaurant) south down Mira prospektisi to the old airport, US embassy and Hotel Issyk-Köl.

Trolleybus 4 From Osh bazaar, along Moskva, left on Soviet and then north to Jibek Jolu.

Car & Taxi

Most travel agencies (p282) can arrange a car and driver but you are better off just hiring a taxi for the day at a fraction of the price.

Essentially anyone with a car is a taxi. Official taxis, marked by the checkerboard symbol, are most reliable. The best-quality taxis are **Super Taxi** (☎ 152) or **Salam Taxi** (☎ 188). A short ride in the city costs around 70som, more at night.

You can book a taxi 24 hours a day on ☎ 182 for a small surcharge.

AROUND BISHKEK

Rolling out of the Kyrgyz Alatau, the Ala-Archa, Alamedin and dozens of parallel streams have created a phalanx of high canyons, good for everything from picnics to trekking and skiing to mountaineering.

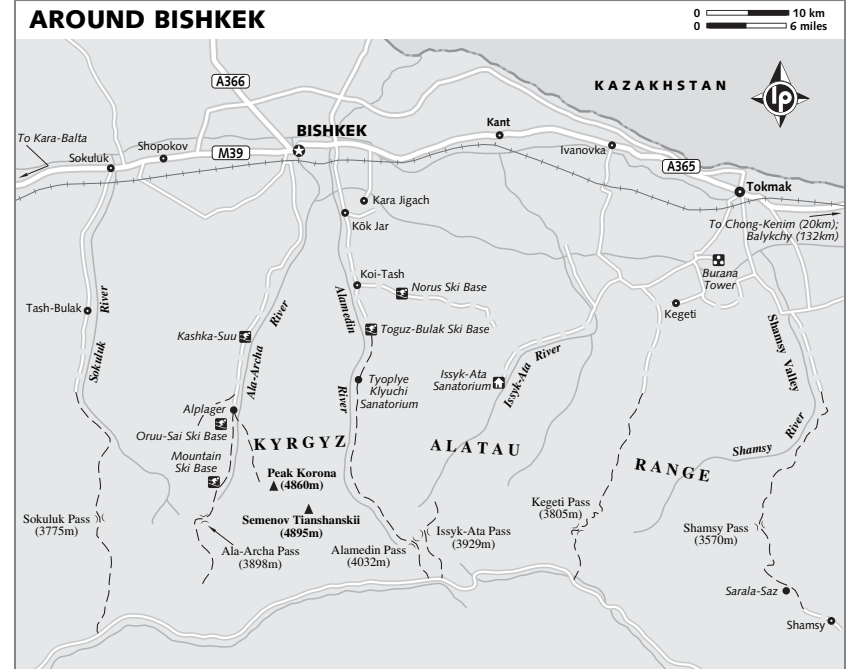
Trekking & Spas

There are many possible do-it-yourself summer treks, but bring your own food and gear and be prepared for cold weather and storms even in summer. There is limited public transport and you are best off hiring a taxi to drop you at the trailheads, though Bishkek travel agencies (p282) and trekking companies (p284) can provide transport and arrange guided trips.

ALA-ARCHA CANYON

In this very grand, rugged but accessible gorge south of Bishkek, you can sit by a waterfall all day, hike to a glacier (and ski on it, even in summer) or trek on to the region's highest peaks. Most of the canyon is part of a state nature park, and foreigners must pay an entrance fee of 30som. For some hiking routes, see p292.

The park gate is 30km from Bishkek. Some 12km beyond the gate, at 2150m, the sealed



road ends at the *alplager* (base camp), home to a weather station, an A-frame lodge and a shabby hotel. In summer it has recreational facilities, baths and a sauna. Beyond this point the only transport is by foot or 4WD.

Sleeping & Eating

The best way to enjoy Ala-Archa is by bringing your own tent and sleeping bag. The only year-round accommodation is a wooden **hotel** (d200som) in the *alplager*, with a dozen spartan doubles, a common toilet and no running water, or the nearby A-frame, alpine-style **lodge** (☎ 0543-91 60 48; s/d/tr US\$40/50/70, lux US\$80). Try to avoid visiting on Saturday or Sunday, when *'biznezmen'* turn up by the BMW-load to drink vodka and eat salami.

Getting There & Away

Bishkek travel agencies can arrange pricey day and longer trips including guides and gear. The best budget alternative would be to hire a taxi or hitch (though you'll still end up paying for the ride).

From Osh Bazaar bus stand in Bishkek, bus 365 runs five times a day to the gate

(30som). Ask *vorota zapovednika?* (nature park gate?) when you board. You may even find minibuses running as far as the *alplager*. If these aren't running (likely outside of summer weekends), take a minibus from the Osh Bazaar bus stand as far as Kashka-Suu village, 7km from the park gate (itself 12km from the *alplager*), and hitch or hike from there.

Also from Bishkek, on Moskva, west-bound bus 11, and on Soviet, west-bound bus 26, go about 12km south to the end of the line near the city limits, from where you can hire a taxi or hitch (ask for *alplager*, not just 'Ala-Archa').

A taxi from Osh Bazaar costs around 150som one way to the gate, or 200som to the *alplager*. If you are planning to return the same day negotiate a rate for the day, otherwise you face a long hike back to the gate or leave yourself to the mercy of the taxi sharks at the *alplager*.

OTHER CANYONS

Several valleys east of Ala-Archa have good walks and fewer visitors. In next-door **Alamedin Canyon**, 40km south of Bishkek, the

main destination for local people is an old sanatorium called **Tyoplye Klyuchi** (hot springs/mud bath 60/800som) run by the Ministry of Power, with cheap accommodation and food. Although not protected by a national park, the scenery above and beyond here is as grand and walkable as Ala-Archa's.

Take bus 145 from Alamedin Bazaar in Bishkek, get off at Koy-Tash village and hitch the 14km to the gate. Buses are said to depart frequently throughout the day in summer.

Another thermal-spring complex (*kurort*) and guesthouse is about 45km southeast of Bishkek in **Issyk-Ata Canyon** (hot-spring in public/private pool 25/100som). A guesthouse here has foreigners' rooms for US\$40, or a spartan hostel for around 100som. There are five or six buses a day to the complex (193 and 307) from Bishkek's east bus station.

Some travel agents take hiking or horse-riding groups to a lake and waterfalls in **Kegeti Canyon**, which is 75km southeast of Bishkek. There's one bus a day to Kegeti at 1.30pm from Bishkek's east bus station, or take a bus to Tokmak and then hire a taxi. There is no accommodation here so plan on bringing a tent if you intend to overnight.

Southwest of Ala-Archa lies the village of Tash-Bulak, from where you can make nice

overnight trips up the fir tree-lined **Sokoluk Canyon** (also known as Belagorka) to two small lakes that are unmarked on the topographical maps. With a guide it is possible to make a three-day trek over the Sokuluk Pass (3775m) into the Suusamyр Valley. There is one bus a day to Tash-Bulak at 10am from the Osh Bazaar bus stand. Alternatively take minibus 369 to the village of Sokuluk and then take a shared taxi or hitch the remaining 24km south to Tash-Bulak.

Nurdan of South Guesthouse in Bishkek (p285) is an experienced guide for this area and can arrange transport.

Skiing

So many mountains, so few chair lifts. By international standards the ski fields in the Ala-Archa and Alamedin Valleys, 30km and 40km south of Bishkek, are undeveloped. If you have realistic expectations or prefer your piste uncrowded, strap on your sticks for there's plenty of powder. Kyrgyz Concept (p282) and Edelweiss (p284) arrange ski tours and jeeps, although it is possible to get there by 4WD taxi (400som) depending on road conditions. Extreme Plus (p289) and ITMC Tien Shan (p284) rent skis and boards.

TREKKING IN ALA-ARCHA

There are dozens of trekking and climbing possibilities here, but three main options. The gentlest walk runs 300m down-valley from the *alplager* (base camp), then across a footbridge and south-west up the **Adygene Valley**. Along this way is a climbers' cemetery in a larch grove, a pretty and poignant scene. The track continues for about 7km to 3300m, below Adygene Glacier.

The most popular trek goes straight up the main canyon on a disused 4WD track about 22km, to the abandoned **Upper Ala-Archa Mountain Ski Base**. There's a run-down ski chalet here, where trekkers can stay if it's not full. This is a long and tiring walk so start early in order to reach the ski chalet before nightfall.

Most demanding and dramatic is **Ak-Say Canyon**, with access via Ak-Say Glacier to the area's highest peaks. A trail climbs steeply to the east immediately above the *alplager*, continuing high above the stream. A strenuous three hours brings you to a camping area at the base of the icefall at 3350m (with a backpackers' tent city in summer). Another hour's or two's graft brings you to the beautiful glacial valley. Beyond here, climbers use a steel hut beside the glacier at 4150m (accessible only with some glacier walking). Serious climbing routes continue up to the peaks of Korona (4860m) and Uchtiyel (4572m). Semenov Tianshanskii (4895m), the highest peak in the Kyrgyz Alatau, is nearby.

You should be particularly careful about altitude sickness on this route. Try to do at least one day hike before tackling this route and don't sleep any higher than the icefall on the first night. See p479 for more info.

The trekking season around Ala-Archa is May to September or October, though the trail to the Ak-Say Glacier can be covered in snow even in August. Geoid in Bishkek (p279) sells a good 1:50,000 topographic map of the entire park, called *Prirodny Park Ala-Archa*.

HELI-SKIING

Despite mountains of snow, the Terskey Alatau range has little in the way of ski-field development and many side valleys, ridges and glaciers are seldom, if ever, skied. Several companies such as Bishkek's Ak Sai Travel (p284) and Karakol's Turkestan (p302) can arrange heli-skiing – Kyrgyzstan's answer to the chairlift shortage.

MI-8-MTB helicopters ferry groups of up to 15 skiers and boarders plus guides and pilots to terrain within a zone selected according to snowfall, the weather, and your group's ability. It is possible to get as many as six different adrenaline-inducing descents within a day's skiing. It's worth checking that the guides carry an emergency radio to contact either the helicopter or mountain rescue in case of emergency.

Tourist Center Kashka-Suu (☎ 43 48 35; Kashka-Suu; d/tr/q 760/1050/1400som; lift pass adult/child 250/90som, ski rental 250som) operates a rope tow and the country's only chairlift (provided there is electricity) in a picturesque gorge on the northern slope of Kyrgyz Ridge in the Ala-Archa Valley. The hotel sleeps 65, is rather pleasant and includes a sauna, restaurant and ice-skating.

Orou-Sai Ski Base (☎ 47 37 79; d/q US\$25/45 lux US\$70; rope tow pass 200som, ski rental 250-400som) has three temperamental rope tows and an instructor.

Norus Ski Base (☎ 66 11 11) in the Alamedin Valley has one old and one new rope tow. Accommodation is in an A-frame hotel.

Toguz-Bulak Ski Base (r 500som, cottage US\$80-\$100; 3 meals 300som; rope tow pass 300som, ski/snowboard rental 400-600som) is at a small field with only one platform (600m long) in the Alamedin Valley.

For information on heli-skiing see above.

White-Water Rafting

It is also possible to raft some of the rivers spilling from the mountains. The most commonly rafted river is a 25km stretch of the Chuy between Tokmak and Balykchy (Class II to IV, group of four to seven US\$35 per person, two hours) although some people extend this by continuing on the calm section of the river for a further two hours. See the Silk Road Water Centre (p282) to arrange trips.

BURANA TOWER

East of Kegeti at the mouth of the Shamsy Valley, 80km from Bishkek, is a 1950s Soviet restoration of the so-called Burana Tower, an 11th-century monument that looks like the stump of a huge minaret. A mound to the northwest is all that's left of the ancient citadel of Balasagun, founded by the Sogdians and later, in the 11th century, a capital of the Karakhanids, which was excavated in the 1970s by Russian archaeologists. The Shamsy Valley

itself has yielded a rich hoard of Scythian treasure, including a heavy gold burial mask, all either spirited away to St Petersburg or in storage in Bishkek's State Historical Museum.

You can climb the octagonal minaret (30som) to get an overview of the old city walls. On the other side of the citadel mound is an interesting collection of 6th- to 10th-century *balbals* (Turkic totem-like stone markers). The small **museum** (admission 60som; ☎ 8am-5pm) has 11th-century Christian carvings, Buddhist remains and Chinese coins, as well as info on local literary hero Haji Balasagun and his masterwork, the *Kutudhu Bilik*. Next door are the foundations of several mausoleums.

To get to Burana on your own, take the frequent 353 minibus from Bishkek's east bus station to Tokmak (40som, 45 minutes), from where it's about a 24km (250som) round trip by taxi. Buses run to Burana from Tokmak at 7am, 12.10pm and 3.30pm, returning 90 minutes later. The minaret could easily be visited en route to or from Issyk-Köl.

To the north, **Tokmak** has a large Sunday animal bazaar on the outskirts of town. Buses run frequently from the east bus station.

CHONG-KEMIN VALLEY

The 80km-long Chong-Kemin Valley and National Park lies about 140km east of Bishkek, along the Kazakh border. The valley is famous locally as the birthplace of deposed president Akaev, but more importantly for travellers, it provides another great opportunity to roll up your sleeping bag and trek into the hills.

Trekking routes lead up the valley to Jasy-Köl (Green Lake) and either the Ozyorny Pass (3609m) to Kazakhstan's Bolshoe Almatinskoe region or the Ak-Suu Pass (4062m) to Grigorievka on the northern shores of Issyk-Köl.

SOVIET SECRETS

The town of Chong-Tash, 10km from Kashka-Suu village, holds a dark secret. On one night in 1937, the entire Soviet Kyrgyz government – nearly 140 people in all – were rounded up, brought here and shot dead, and their bodies dumped in a disused brick kiln on the site. Apparently almost no-one alive by the 1980s knew of this, by which time the site had been converted to a ski resort. But a watchman at the time of the murders, sworn to secrecy, told his daughter on his deathbed, and she waited until *perestroika* to tell police.

In 1991 the bodies were moved to a mass grave across the road, with a simple memorial, apparently paid for by the Kyrgyz author Chinghiz Aitmatov (whose father may have been one of the victims). The remains of the kiln are inside a fence nearby.

Minibuses 365 runs daily to Chong-Tash from the Osh Bazaar bus stands in Bishkek.

For trekking information see the boxed text, p136.

There's no formal accommodation in the valley but travellers recommend contacting Temirlan Daniyarov in Kaindy, the last hamlet in the valley, who can arrange a place to stay and horse treks. There are two buses a day to Chong-Kemin (70som, 2½ hours) from Bishkek's east bus station, at 10am and 1pm. Otherwise take a more frequent 352 bus to Kemin (45som, one hour) and then take a shared taxi the remaining 50km to Chong-Kemin (40som) or to Kaindy (80som).

LAKE ISSYK-KÖL & THE CENTRAL TIAN SHAN

ОЗЕРО ИССЫК-КУЛЬ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫЙ ТЯНЬ ШАНЬ

Lake Issyk-Köl (also Ysyk-Köl) is basically a huge dent, filled with water, between the Küngey (Sunny) Alatau to the north and the Terskey (Dark) Alatau to the south, which together form the northern arm of the Tian Shan. The name means 'warm lake'. A combination of extreme depth, thermal activity and mild salinity ensures the lake never freezes; its moderating effect on the climate, plus abundant rainfall, have made it something of an oasis through the centuries.

The Kyrgyz are proud of their lake and like a beautiful woman on the arm of a Bishkek *biznesman*, she is trotted out, tarted up and paraded around whenever international guests need to be impressed. And why not?

For beautiful she is – in all her querulous moods. Even as storms rage across her northern sandy shores, the steep and stony south lies calm and still.

Scores of streams pour into the lake but none escape her. Over 170km long, 70km across and the second-largest alpine lake in the world (after Lake Titicaca in South America), Issyk-Köl is a force of nature and she knows it.

Some people say the lake level has periodically risen and fallen over the centuries, inundating ancient shoreline settlements. Artefacts have been recovered from what is called the submerged city of Chigu, dating from the 2nd century BC, at the east end. Mikhaylovka inlet, created by an earthquake near Karakol, reveals the remains of a partly submerged village. Despite recent fluctuations, geological evidence points to a long-term drop – some 2m in the last 500 years.

After tsarist military officers and explorers put the lake on Russian maps, immigrants flooded in to found low-rise, laid-back, rough-and-ready towns. Health spas lined its shores in Soviet days, with guests from all over the USSR, but spa tourism crashed along with the Soviet Union, only reviving in the last few years thanks to an influx of moneyed Kazakh tourists. Choplan-Ata (p296) is the safest bet for those keen for a Russian-style rub down but for a surreal experience head to the Jet-Öghüz Sanatorium (p309), once a favoured holiday-spot for Soviet dignitaries and cosmonauts and now Central Asia's leading contender as the most likely place to be haunted. Close your eyes and listen to the place fall apart.

The part of the central Tian Shan range accessible from the lake comprises perhaps the finest trekking territory in Central Asia. The

ISSYK-KÖL BIOSPHERE RESERVE

The Issyk-Köl region has an astonishing array of ecosystems, from desert and semi-desert in the southwest to steppe, meadow, forest, and subalpine and glacial to the north and southeast. Local fauna includes Marco Polo sheep, ibex, wild boar, snow leopards, ibisbill, manul, Himalayan snowcocks, wild geese, egrets and other waders.

Plans are therefore afoot to create a reserve the size of Switzerland around the lake. This would consist of a mountainous core area, a buffer zone that would allow seasonal land use, and a transition and rehabilitation zone. The proposals will link up several existing reserves.

most popular treks hop between valleys south of Karakol or lead from Almaty to the lake.

History

The Kyrgyz people migrated in the 10th to 15th centuries from the Yenisey river basin in Siberia, and in all probability arrived by way of Issyk-Köl. This high basin would be a natural stopover for any caravan or conquering army as well. It appears to have been a centre of Saka (Scythian) civilisation and legend has it that Timur (Tamerlane) used it for a summer headquarters (p299). There are at least 10 documented settlements currently under the waters of the lake and treasure hunters have long scoured the lake for flooded trinkets attributed to everyone from Christian monks to Jenghiz Khan.

The first Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian settlers came to the east end of the lake in 1868. Karakol town was founded the next year, followed in the 1870s by Tüp, Teploklyuchenka (Ak-Suu), Ananyevo, Pokrovka (now Kyzyl-Suu) and a string of others, many of whose Cossack names have stuck. Large numbers of Dungans and Uyghurs arrived in the 1870s and '80s following the suppression of Muslim uprisings in China's Shaanxi, Gansu and Xinjiang provinces. Local Kyrgyz and Kazakhs were still at that time mostly nomadic.

The Issyk-Köl region (and in fact most of Kyrgyzstan beyond Bishkek) was off limits to foreigners in Soviet times. Locals mention vast, officially sanctioned plantations of opium poppies and cannabis around the lake,

though most of these had disappeared under international pressure by the early 1970s.

More importantly, Issyk-Köl was used by the Soviet navy to test high-precision torpedoes, far from prying Western eyes. An entire polygon or military-research complex grew around Koy-Sary, on the Mikhaylovka inlet near Karakol. In 1991 Russian President Boris Yeltsin asked that it be continued but Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev shut down the whole thing, ordering it to be converted to peaceful pursuits. These days the most secretive thing in the lake is the mysterious *jekai*, a Kyrgyz version of the Loch Ness monster.

Jokes about the 'Kyrgyz navy' refer to a fleet of some 40 ageing naval cutters, now mothballed at Koy-Sary or decommissioned and hauling goods and tourists up and down the lake.

Getting There & Away

The western road access to Issyk-Köl is a 40km-long, landslide-prone, slightly sinister canyon called Shoestring Gorge (Boömskoe ushcheliye), which climbs into the Alatau east of Tokmak, with a howling wind funnelling up it most of the time.

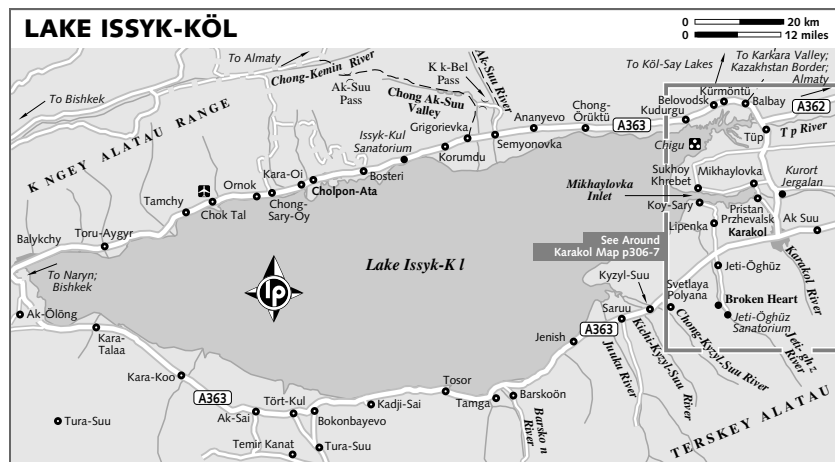
There's a police checkpoint just west of Balykchy, where cars are searched for drugs and an 'ecotax' is collected from each inbound vehicle from outside Issyk-Köl and Naryn provinces.

From the north, a rough jeep road (4WD only) from Almaty's Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake leads over the Ozerny Pass, through the Chong-Kemin Valley and then the Kok Ayryk Pass to Chong-Sary-Oy near Cholpon-Ata. There's no public transport along the route, the bridges often get washed out and there's no immigration post, making it a particularly tricky option for foreigners. It might make an interesting mountain-bike trip if you can sort out the visa situation.

TAMCHY TAMЧЫ

📍 3943

This small lakeshore village, 35km from Cholpon-Ata, has a decent beach and offers a quieter alternative to larger, bustling Cholpon-Ata. Out of season, you'll likely see more donkeys than tourists on the beach. The town boasts one small supermarket, near the mosque on the main road (Manas), which is big on vodka and light on everything else. By the end of September you'll find more life in a morgue.



Tamchy Guesthouse (cnr Batikov & Chynyshbaeva; s/d 100/200som) In a town where you get what you pay for, these green-and-white beach sheds are the cheapest option around. Because of the decrepit state of the rooms and lack of shower facilities, they are sometimes reluctant to check in foreigners.

CBT (☎ 2 13 39; cnr Batikov & Isabekov; dm 250-300som) Right on the beach and a five-minute walk from the main road. Offers decent rooms (price includes breakfast) and can put you in touch with other homestays in the area. It also arranges donkey rental, day trips and overnight yurtstays in the hills north of town. Contact Kudaibergen Kurenov.

During the summer months many locals rent rooms to Kazakh holidaymakers and, once over their disbelief that a foreigner wants to stay, are happy to take in guests. Ask around.

There's lots of minibus traffic through to Bishkek (90som) and Cholpon-Ata (50som). Flag down anything with wheels going your way on the main road. The Issyk-Köl airport, 3km outside Tamchy near the village of Chok Tal, is currently closed for renovation thanks to a Russian grant.

CHOLPON-ATA ЧОЛПОН АТА

☎ 3943

Cholpon-Ata hums during high season (mid-July to August) when the town is besieged by Russian, Kazakh and local holidaymakers, all of whom head for the beach, which is about as far away from the ocean as you can get.

The number of cafés jump from about five to around 30 in the height of summer if you include all the 'Mum and Dad' operations selling borscht, shashlyk and beer.

Sports teams from other Central Asian republics and Russia compete here in early September in track and field events and soccer tournaments. Besides the beach, the ancient rock inscriptions on the outskirts of town are the village's main attraction. The sanatorium, formerly a retreat for the Communist Party elite, has fallen into disrepair, although it's still operational.

Orientation & Information

The town has two reference points: the bazaar and, 1km west, the cluster of shops around the post office. Both are on the main road.

There's internet access at the **post office** (per hr 20som plus 8som megabyte) and lots of exchange booths around town.

Investbank (☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat) gives advances on Visa and MasterCard for 3% commission and has an ATM. The bank is set off the road, within the newly revamped children's park.

Ecocentre (☎ 4 22 76; Soviet 61; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is a Kyrgyz-German cooperative opened in 2004 to help formulate sustainable tourism initiatives within the local community. Currently there is little information in English and the small exhibit of flora and fauna from within the Issyk-Köl Biosphere is in Russian. This could change with the opening of a Tourist Information Centre on the right side of the

building in 2007. The Ecocentre also offers accommodation within the same building in a series of clean, functional, although pricey, rooms.

Sights & Activities

BEACHES & BOATS

A pleasant public beach lies 1km south of the west bus station. Walk south from the bus station to the chalets of the Gost Residenza and then head east, across a bridge over a lagoon to the beach. In true Soviet style, the Speedo-sporting, pot-bellied men here like to sunbathe standing up. The presidential beach house is nearby; when the president is in town the police are out in force. Keep your passport at the ready and an eye out for his luxury yacht. There is another larger beach called Alytn-Köl, 4km east of Cholpon-Ata.

The Manas Cultural Park on the lakeshore has a small sculpture garden.

The **Kruiz Yacht Club** (☎ 4 43 73) has a handful of sailboats (US\$25 per hour for up to six people) and even an overpriced scuba-diving centre.

PETROGLYPHS

Above the town is a huge field of glacial boulders, many with pictures scratched or picked into their surfaces. Some of these **petroglyphs** (adult/student 30/50som, guides per person 40som; ☎ daylight) date from the later Bronze Age (about 1500 BC) but most are Saka-Usun (8th century BC to 1st century AD), predating the arrival of the Kyrgyz in the area. The Saka priests used

the sacred site for sacrifices and other rites to the sun god and lived in settlements that are currently underwater in the Cholpon-Ata bay. Later engravings date from the Turkic era (5th to 10th century). Most are of long-horned ibex, along with some wolves, deer and hunters, and some rocks appear to be arranged in sacred circles. Late afternoon is a good time to view the stones, which all face south.

Take the signed road opposite the boatyard turn-off north for 2.2km, bearing left to a section of black iron fence. The stones are behind this. There's a nice view of Issyk-Köl below. Guided tours of the petroglyphs can be arranged at the regional museum and help pinpoint the field's more impressive inscriptions.

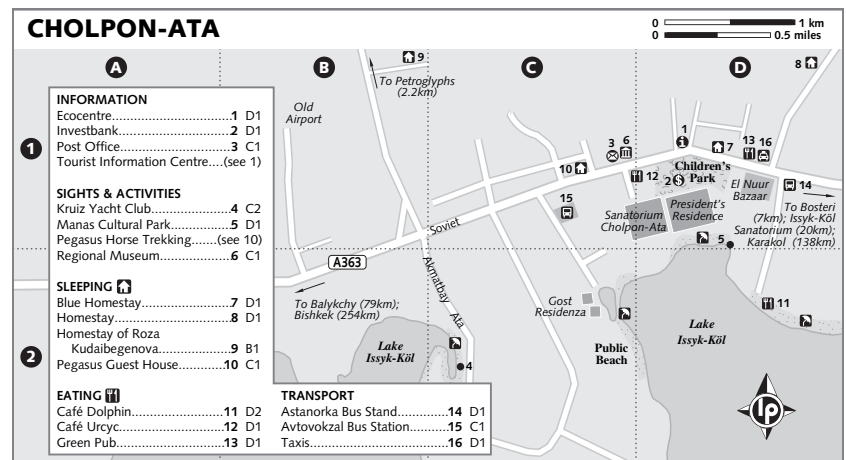
There are more petroglyphs in the region, at Kara-Oi, a 2km walk from the site, and near Ornok (4km up the new jeep road to Kazakhstan).

REGIONAL MUSEUM

This small **Issyk-Köl museum** (☎ 4 21 48; Soviet 69; adult/camera 35/250som; ☎ 9am-6pm) is worth a quick visit. The emphasis is on archaeology, with displays of local Scythian (Saka) gold jewellery, *balbal* gravestones and a fine set of mouth harps. Other rooms are devoted to ethnography, Kyrgyz bards, music and costume.

TREKKING & HORSE RIDING

Ornok forest, north of the petroglyph park, is popular with locals who collect mushrooms here during August. Follow the old logging



road on the left side of the valley, keep the river on the right.

Pegasus Horse Trekking (☎ 4 24 50; pegaso@mail.ru; Soviet 81) is run by the same lady who operates the B&B of the same name. She organises horse treks to Ornok Valley and along the lakeshore, offers expert instruction for less-confident riders and can arrange multiday excursions to Grigorievka (opposite) and beyond. With a few days notice she will also organise a display of nomadic equestrian games (17,000som to 20,000som) at the local hippodrome. During July these can be seen for free as part of the Unesco-supported horse games.

Sleeping

Plenty of families rent out rooms (*komnat* in Russian) in Cholpon-Ata. The best people to ask are the elderly ladies at the bus station, although someone may approach you directly if you have a backpack and look lost.

Blue Homestay (☎ 4 23 02; Soviet 39; d/tr 200/300som) Unsigned but unmistakably painted dark blue, this is a good option with a communal kitchen and dining area, large garden and shared bathroom. The houses nearby are also homestays and also unsigned. Ask for 'Gastinochnyi Dom' when you ring the doorbell, or just look lost.

Homestay (☎ 4 39 51; cholponalim@maril.ru; Osmanova 4; dm 200som) A five-minute walk north of the El Nuur Bazaar, this is a friendly place, but a bit out of the way. Look for the tatty basketball hoop hanging off the garage. Meals are available.

Homestay of Roza Kudaibegenova (☎ 4 32 69; Birlık 1; dm US\$5) This is a bit out of the way, en route to the petroglyphs. Roza speaks good English. Meals available.

our pick **Pegasus Guest House** (☎ 4 24 50; pegaso@mail.ru; Soviet 8; dm 300som;) Tatiana Kemelevna

and her irrepressible son, Bukit, have a good handle on budget backpacker requirements and can offer advice on local activities and all things equine. The price includes breakfast and the house is clean and comfortable and centrally located near the post office.

Eating & Drinking

Most cafés close between October and May.

Café Urcyc (Soviet 68; mains 50-85som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Nestled among a string of cafés, it serves decent food at reasonable prices.

Green Pub (☎ 4 29 76; Soviet 11; mains 80-150som, tap beer 35som; ☎ summer only, lunch & dinner) This Russian-operated restaurant gives *shashlik* (80som) a new twist by threading vegetables between the meat chunks. The barbecue fish (150som) is also recommended.

Café Dolphin (mains 40-60som; ☎ summer only) Serves the best *plov* (45som) in Cholpon-Ata and doles out ice cold beers to thirsty sunbathers.

Getting There & Away

Cholpon-Ata, being the premier resort town for nearby and comparatively wealthy Kazakhs, is particularly prone to fluctuating transport costs. During summer, shared-taxi prices are doubled for tourists and locals alike. Prices here are low-season rates.

Buses run every hour from 7am to 7pm to/from Bishkek (100som) and continue to Grigorievka (35som), Ananyevo (50som), and Karakol (80som). There are also minibuses (Bishkek 150som; Karakol 100som) and shared taxis (Bishkek 200som; Karakol 150som), which depart from either the Avtovokzal bus station (west bound) or Astanorka bus stand near the bazaar (east bound). Taxis costs around 800som to Bishkek or Karakol. In summer, overnight buses run to Almaty around 8am (500som).

GRIGORIEVKA & THE AK-SUU VALLEY

It's possible to take a detour from Grigorievka village up the Chong Ak-Suu Valley to a trio of alpine lakes. The Helvetas-supported **Rural Advisory Service (RADS) coordinator** (contact Nazgul Namazbaeva, Russian only; Likholetova 6) in Grigorievka, a couple of kilometres off the main road, can theoretically arrange transport, horses and yurtstays up in the valley, though the programme hasn't yet had much experience. Pegasus Horse Trekking (p298) organises horse treks between Grigorievka and Semenovka gorges overnighting in either tents or yurts. Alternatively, you could hitch and hike up the valley 22km or so to the sea-green lakes. There are two yurts, a sanatorium and a yurt café along the valley, with a yurtstay (check first) by the first lake.

The nearby village of Semenovka offers access to the Kichi (Little) Ak-Suu Valley, which has the Kyrchyn Gorge and a winter sports centre.

KARKARA VALLEY КАРКАРАНСКАЯ ДОЛИНА

The eastern gateway to the Issyk-Köl Basin is an immense, silent valley called Karkara, straddling the Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan border. On the Kyrgyzstan side it begins about 60km northeast of Karakol and widens out to 40km or more, shoulder-deep in good pasture during summer. Every herder in the Karakol region (and in the Kegen region on the Kazakhstan side) brings animals up here in summer to fatten, and the warm-weather population is an easy-going mix of Kyrgyz and Kazakh *chabana* (cowboys), their families and their yurts.

The name Karkara means Black Crane, after the graceful migratory birds that stop here in June and again in August to September, en route between South Africa and Siberia.

Summer's end brings the **Shepherds' Festival**, an annual gathering of cowboys and herders at the end of August. Horseback games and eagle hunting are held at the yurt camps near Char-Kuduk village.

In his *A Day Lasts Longer Than a Century* the Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov has the ancient Kyrgyz peoples arriving here from the Yenisey region of Siberia.

Some people suggest that Timur (Tamerlane) made Karkara his summer headquarters for several years, and point to a house-size pile of round stones in the southwest part of the valley. These, they say, were Timur's way of estimating his losses in eastern campaigns –

each departing soldier put a rock on the pile, each returnee removed one, and the stones that remained represented the dead. The name of the site, **San-Tash**, means 'Counting Stones'.

Sceptics and amateur historians point to an adjacent, stone-lined pit that appears to be the remnant of a burial chamber, and suggest that the football-size stones were just used to cover the chamber, and were removed by archaeologists or grave-robbers. Either way, the site has a dreamy, magical feel.

Sleeping

Ethnotour Santash (☎ in Karakol 3922-2 32 36; per person €12) the TIC in Karakol can put you in touch with a fledgling yurt camp, near the Kyrgyz village of Char-Kuduk and close to the Alpinist's and the Kazakh company Kan Tengri's base camps, just across the river in Kazakhstan (p136). Breakfast is included, or three meals cost €18.

Another **yurt camp** (0502-21 70 79; B&B 400som) near Karkara village can also arrange trekking within the area. Contact Tolon Jumanaliv.

Shaidelda, who runs **Shaidylada's B&B** (☎ 3945-21411; Belinskaya 1) in Tüp village once ran a yurt camp in the valley and may still be a useful source of information. Breakfast is included and other meals are 120som.

Getting There & Away

The Karkara Valley is about 50km east of Tüp or 70 much prettier but rougher kilometres from Karakol (p183) via Novovoznesensk. On the Tüp route a round trip by taxi from Karakol is about 1800som one-way. Ask for *pamyatnik San-Tash* (San-Tash Monument), just opposite a small collective farm settlement, 19km from the Kazakhstan border.

Derelict buses run from Karakol's Ak Tilek Bazaar to San-Tash (60som) via Tüp at 12.30pm. There's also a slow daily bus to Char-Kuduk via San-Tash. There are daily buses to Kyzyl Jar (former Sovietskoe) or on to the mining town of Jyrgalang (Russians call it Jergalan *shakhta*, which means 'mine'); you might try hitching from Kyzyl Jar.

The Karkara (Karkyra) River forms the modern Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan border through part of the valley and this makes an interesting route to or from Kazakhstan. If you are headed to Kazakhstan make sure you get a border stamp, even if it means waiting some time. You will of course need valid visas for both republics. There's no cross-border public transport.

TREKKING TO KAZAKHSTAN

From the Chong Ak-Suu lakes, a fine trekking route continues west up the Chong Ak-Suu Valley to the Ak-Suu (Severny Aksu) Pass (4052m), into the Chong-Kemin Valley and on along trekking routes to Almaty. For more on these routes, see p136.

From **Balbay** village (also called Sary-Bulak), 80km east of Grigorievka at the northeast corner of the lake, another option to Kazakhstan is the two-day walk north over the 3274m Sary-Bulak Pass to the pretty Kolsay lakes, east of Almaty (p134). A variant on the same route can take you over the nearby 3350m Kurmenty Pass.

Bear in mind that you won't get a visa stamp in or out of either country along these routes, which could be a problem. See p182 for more about potential visa problems.

HIDDEN TREASURES

Large mounds on both sides of the road just west of the village of **Belovodsk** (50km east of Ananyevo or 15km west of Tüp) are said to be unexcavated Scythian (Saka) burial chambers. Other mounds excavated near Barskoön, across the lake, yielded bronze vessels and jewellery (now in museums in St Petersburg). There are more in the Karkara Valley just across the Kazakh border. One near the town of Yessik in Kazakhstan yielded a fabulous golden warrior's costume, now Kazakhstan's greatest archaeological treasure (p119).

At Belovodsk is a turn-off south to the hamlet of Svetyy Mys, which at least one Soviet archaeologist insisted was the site of a 4th- or 5th-century Armenian Christian monastery. The story goes that its inhabitants were driven out by surrounding tribes, but not before hiding a huge cache of gold (and, some say, the bones of St Matthew) that has never been found. From the hills above, the village roads can be seen to trace something approximating an Orthodox cross.

Coming from the Kazakhstan side, you can get a Kegen, Saryzhaz or Narynkol bus from Almaty and get off at Kegen, from where it's a difficult 28km hitch south to the border itself. A taxi from Karakol to Almaty via Kegen takes about seven hours and costs around US\$120, including car customs fees.

KARAKOL KAPAKOJI

☎ 3922 / pop 66,000

Karakol is a peaceful, low-rise town with backstreets full of Russian gingerbread cottages, shaded by rows of huge white poplars. Around the town are apple orchards, for which the area is famous. This is the administrative centre of Issyk-Köl province, and the best base for exploring the lakeshore, the Terskey Alatau and the central Tian Shan. It also has a very good Sunday market. In fact, try to time your visit to include a Sunday, when the animal bazaar and Russian Cathedral are at their most active.

It's not quite paradise for those who live here – the economic stresses since independence and the decline in spa tourism have led to considerable hardship, thinned out available goods and services, and returned a kind of frontier atmosphere to this old boundary post.

The town name means something like 'black hand/wrist', possibly a reference to the hands of immigrant Russian peasants, black from the valley's rich soil.

History

After a military garrison was established at nearby Teploklyuchenka (Ak-Suu) in 1864, and it dawned on everybody what a fine spot the area near the lake was – mild climate, rich soil, a lake full of fish, and mountains full of hot springs – the garrison commander was told to scout out a place for a full-sized town.

Karakol was founded on 1 July 1869, with streets laid out in a European-style checkerboard, and the garrison was relocated here. The town's early population had a high proportion of military officers, merchants, professionals and explorers.

It was called Przewalski in Soviet times, after the explorer Nikolai Przewalski, whose last expedition ended here, and who is buried on the lakeshore nearby (p305). The town didn't escape a trashing by the Bolsheviks. Its elegant Orthodox church lost its domes and became a club; only one small church on the outskirts was allowed to remain open. Of nine mosques (founded by Tatars, Dungans and various Kyrgyz clans), all bar the Dungan's were wrecked.

Orientation

Karakol has a central square, but the real commercial hubs are the Jakshilik Bazaar (nicknamed *gostinny dvor* – the Russian equivalent of a caravanserai or merchants' inn, after its namesake in St Petersburg) and also Ak Tilek Bazaar (good wishes). The long-distance bus station is about 2km to the north and the 'better' part of the town is considered to be west of the river.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Art Gallery Dali (☎ 2 39 33; Lenina 152; per hr 30som; ☎ 8am-8pm summer, 8.30am-6.30pm winter) Also has internet phone and Skype.

Post office (Gebze; per hr 30som; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri)

LAUNDRY

Red Crescent Laundry (☎ 2 43 55; Dupen Lerbishev 188; per item 5-20som; ☎ 8am-7pm) You can clean more than clothes here – there is a small public *banya* (bath; 35som).

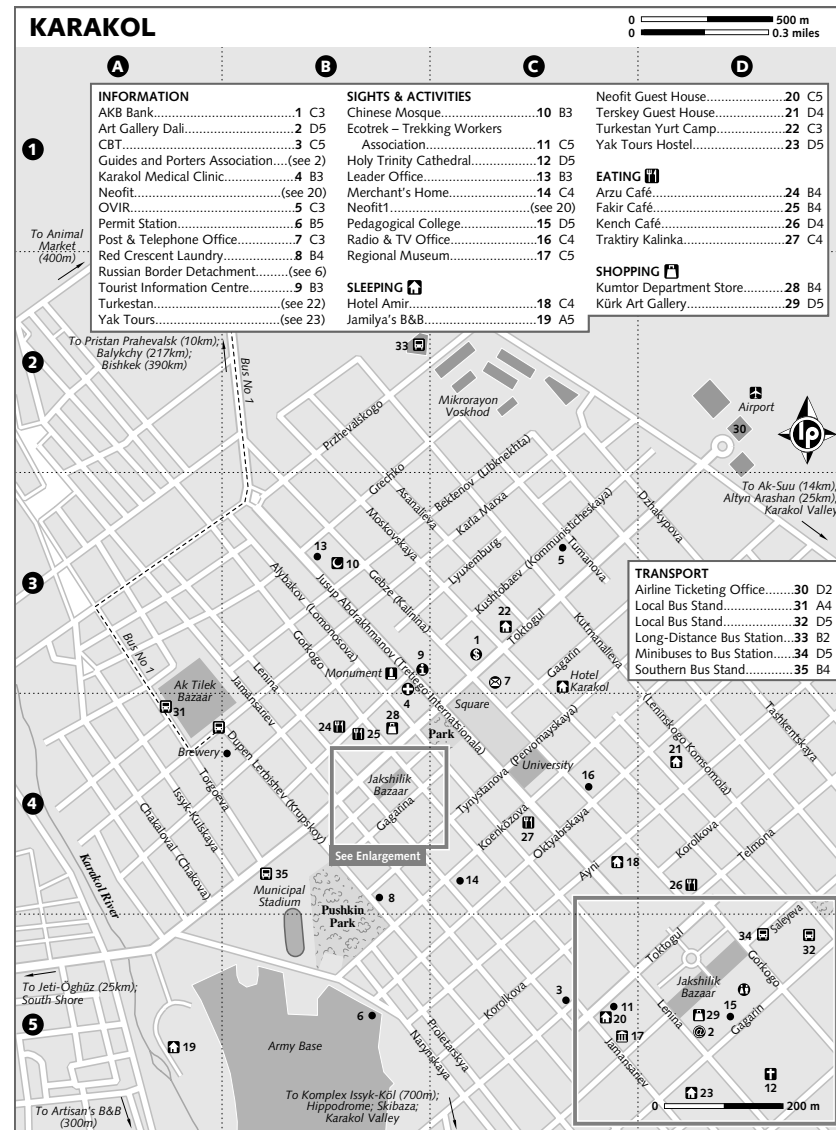
MEDICAL SERVICES

Karakol Medical Clinic (☎ 5 13 23; Jusup Abdrakhmanov; ☎ 8am-5pm) Large and pink, this building is directly opposite the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) whose staff are happy to help translate in an emergency. Doctors keep individual hours and there is a pharmacy on the ground floor.

MONEY

Moneychangers everywhere will change crisp, near-new US dollars into som.

AKB Bank (☎ 5 37 45; Toktogul; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-3pm Mon-Fri) Changes US-dollar travellers cheques into som for a 3% commission (minimum US\$5) and gives cash advances on Visa and MasterCard for 2.5% commission.



Go in the main building, turn left and head upstairs; look for the Western Union sign.

REGISTRATION & VISAS

OVIR (Room 114, Kushtobaev) A 30-day visa extension costs 600som. To register it's 70som.

TOURIST INFORMATION

CBT (☎ 5 50 00; cbt.karakol@rambler.ru; Jusup Abdrakhmanov 123/20; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sun summer, 10am-3pm Mon-Fri winter) Can advise on CBT homestays in the region, including yurtstays in Jeti-Öghüz, the Bel Tam *jailoo* and Karkara. Staff also arrange local excursions, help with onward transport, arrange guides (1000som per day), advise on treks and rent camping equipment. Contact Natalia Ovcharova.

Tourist Information Centre (TIC; ☎ 5 13 56; ticigu@netmail.kg; Jusup Abdrakhmanov 130; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Make this excellent resource your first stop. Particularly useful are the folders detailing all the homestays, cafés, trekking routes and yurt camps in the region. It also sells 1:100,000 topo maps (250som) of southeast Issyk-Köl trekking routes and can phone taxis to get official taxi prices for local and long-distance trips.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Guides & Porters Association (☎ 2 39 33; Lenina 152) This new cooperative of young guides operates from the Art Gallery Dali under the direction of Serebrennikov Valeriy, a mountaineer with 30 years' experience. It can arrange guided treks, English, French or German interpreters and lead five-day mountain-biking trips to Barskoön via Saruu, Juuku Pass and Ara-Bel Valley (mountain-bike rental US\$25 per day).

Turkestan (☎ 5 98 96; www.karakol.kg; Toktogul 273) Turkestan specialises in group trekking and is pricier, but much more professional, than Yak Tours. It can arrange trekking and mountaineering trips to Khan Tengri, horse treks into the Küngey Alatau mountains north of Issyk-Köl, and visits to eagle hunters, as well as no-strings-attached visa support, plus an awesome helicopter trip to Inylchek (US\$150 one way, US\$250 return). In winter it operates heli-skiing trips (eight-day package for 14 skiers, US\$2250 per person). Contact Sergey Pshynenko.

Yak Tours (☎ office 5 69 01, home/fax 2 23 68; yaktours@infotel.kg; Gagarin 10) At his backpacker hostel, Valentin Derevyanko makes on-the-spot arrangements for individuals, including trekking and horse trips. He puts his 50-year-old jeep – which is in a constant state of running repair – to good use ferrying backpackers to his Altyn Arashan accommodation. Certainly it's important that you make it clear exactly what kind of arrangements you want at the outset and pin down a price.

SIGHTS CHINESE MOSQUE

What looks for all the world like a Mongolian Buddhist temple on the corner of Bektenov and Jusup Abdrakhmanov is in fact a mosque, built without nails, completed in 1910 after three years' work by a Chinese architect and 20 Chinese artisans, for the local Dungan community. It was closed by the Bolsheviks from 1933 to 1943, but since then has again become a place of worship.

ANIMAL MARKET

This is no match for Kashgar's Sunday Market, but it is still one of the best **animal markets** (*mal bazari*) in Central Asia. Locals like to load their Lardas with livestock – quite a spectacle if the beast in question refuses to be pushed into the back seat. Fat-tailed sheep, worth their weight in *shashlik*, don't come cheap. Depending on its age, sex and size, a sheep can cost as much as US\$120. Horses start at around US\$300. The market is divided into two compounds, one for sheep and goats; the other, for horses cattle and the occasional camel.

Next door is another area reserved for used cars and parts. A rock-bottom Larda goes for around US\$300 but you'll have to bargain hard. The men here (and it is only men) set their prices high.

Go early if you want to see the market at its best: it starts at 5am and is all over by 10am.

HOLY TRINITY CATHEDRAL

The yellow domes of this handsome cathedral have risen from the rubble of Bolshevism at the corner of Lenina and Gagarin. Karakol's first church services were held in a yurt on this site after the town was founded. A later stone church fell down in an earthquake in 1890 (its granite foundations are still visible). A fine wooden cathedral was completed in 1895 but the Bolsheviks destroyed its five onion-domes and turned it into a club in the 1930s. Serious reconstruction only began in 1961. Services are again held here, since its formal reconsecration in 1991 and again in 1997. Listen for its chimes marking Sunday morning services (7am to 11am).

OTHER COLONIAL BUILDINGS

The colonial-era part of town sprawls southwest from the cathedral and Hotel Karakol – lots of single-storey 'gingerbread' houses,

mostly plain but some (eg those built by wealthier officers and scientists) are quite pretty, and a few (those of Russian merchants and industrialists) have two storeys. Among decaying former merchants' houses are the **Pedagogical College** on Gagarin opposite the cathedral, the **radio & TV office** on Gebze (Kalinina), a block south of Hotel Karakol, and another old **merchant's home** at the corner of Koenközova and Lenina.

REGIONAL MUSEUM

Karakol's modest **regional museum** (Jamansariiev 164; admission 50som, camera 10som; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun summer) is in a sturdy colonial brick building, once the home of a wealthy landowner. It's of limited interest with exhibits on the petroglyphs around Issyk-Köl, a few Scythian bronze artefacts, a Soviet history of the Kyrgyz union with Russia, some Kyrgyz applied art and photographs of old Karakol – all of it better with a guide.

OTHER SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The leafy **Pushkin Park** by the stadium, four blocks south of the centre, includes the collective grave of a squad of Red Army soldiers killed in the pursuit of *basmachi*.

About 3km south of the centre (take bus 1) is Central Asia's very first **hippodrome**. Headless goats are still passionately fought over by mounted horsemen during **Independence Day (31 August)** celebrations. If you are in town at this time, the games are well worth checking out.

Activities

Karakol's travel agencies (opposite) organise activities such as horse riding, skiing, mountaineering and mountain biking.

TREKKING

At the height of summer it seems that every other traveller has just descended down a mountain and immediately bandies around superlative-studded sentences that cause the other half to rush out, rent a sleeping bag and take to the hills. With so many trekking opportunities and a concentration of well-informed travel agencies (opposite) there is no good reason not to. See the boxed text, p308 for a sample of the possible routes. The **TIC** (opposite) also rents tents (US\$5), sleeping bags (US\$4), backpacks (US\$2) and sleeping mats (US\$1).

Alp Tour Issyk Köl (☎ 2 05 48; khanin@infotel.kg)

This professional company offers a range of treks around Karakol and further afield, including Kazakhstan and Khan Tengri base camp. They can arrange border permits in a day (US\$25), supply guide/cooks (US\$25/35 per day), porters (US\$18) and climbing guides for Khan Tengri (US\$40 to US\$50). The staff will also resupply your own long-distance treks and arrange daily transport on request to the Karakol ski base in winter. Contact Stas & Igor.

Ecotrek – Trekking Workers Association (☎ 5 11 15; karakol@rambler.ru; Toktogula 112A) Rents trekking equipment including sleeping bags (100som), two-/three-person tents (160som), primus stoves (40soms) and sells gas canisters. The staff can also arrange guided treks (guides, cooks and porters) and guided horse treks in the surrounding valleys including a five-day trek from their yurt camp in the Valley of the Flowers, and Jeti-Öghuz to Altyn Arashan.

Leader (☎ 5 41 84; root@lider.cango.net.kg; Bldg 142, Apt 6, Jusup Abdrakhmanov 142) This NGO rents out trekking equipment to fund its youth development programmes. Equipment includes backpacks (50som per day), tents (100som to 150som), sleeping bags (50soms), sleeping mats and stoves (20som each) and mountaineering equipment (not rope). You can find Leader on the corner of Gorkogo, just north of the mosque, hidden on the 2nd floor of an apartment block and accessed from the east.

Neofit (☎ 2 06 50; www.neofit.kg/Kyrgyzstan.htm; Jamansariiev 166) All kinds of trekking support including outfitting and border permits; based in the Neofit guesthouse.

Sleeping

Karakol has more homestays than you can shake a sleeping bag at and both CBT and TIC (opposite) can put you in touch with the local homestays. Generally prices range from 250som to 450som per person including breakfast and most can provide dinner for an additional 100som to 120som, although (depending what you are served) this is not always the best value; local restaurants are often cheaper.

Turkestan Yurt Camp (☎ 5 64 89; Toktogul 273; tent site & shower usage €2, yurt dm & shower usage €5, r per person €10) The slightly muttomy-smelling yurt dorms here have a base-camp feel as trekking expeditions bustle in and out in the Russian Zil trucks. The meals (3 meals €15) are served up in a cosy wooden bar.

Yak Tours Hostel (☎ 5 69 01, ☎/fax 2 23 68; yaktours@infotel.kg; Gagarin 10; dm 200som) This was the first backpacker-style hostel in Central Asia. Facilities include left luggage, equipment rental, an info board, a communal kitchen and a small

collection of videos on Central Asia. There is an eclectic array of rooms, some comfortable private and secure, others less so with beds in corridors (separated by a curtain). You can pitch a tent in the yard for 50som. Chef Babalina makes tasty food (meals from 100som). The downside is there's only one bathroom.

Gala's Group (r per person 200-350som) Runs four apartments around town that make for a cheap alternative to midrange hotels. Options range from single rooms to apartments with two double rooms, an equipped kitchen, hot showers and phone. Book at the TIC.

Artisan's B&B (☎ 5 01 71; Murmanskaya 114; dm 350som) This appropriately named B&B is run by a family of artisans who built everything by hand themselves; from the house itself to the painted Chinese horoscope on the ceiling.

Terskey Guesthouse (☎ 2 62 68; www.teskey.narod.ru; Asanalieva 44; dm 400som) It has Western-style bathrooms, a Russian-style sauna, excellent food and a laundry service. The son, Taalai, speaks good English; his mother is a wonderful host and his father owns a terminally ill taxi.

Neofit Guesthouse (☎ 2 06 50; neofit@issyk-kul.kg; Jamansariyev 166; s 400som) A central, clean option, popular with trekkers who swap stories over a beer in the sociable courtyard. There's a wide range of old-fashioned but comfortable rooms with a private bathroom (but common shower), plus parking and a bizarre dungeon (summer only) restaurant.

Jamilya's B&B (☎ 4 30 19; kemelov@hotmail.com; Shopokova 34B; dm 450som) The mother-and-son team both speak excellent English and offer rooms with a hue – lime, purple, yellow or blue. The bathrooms are spotless, the balcony pleasant and there is a yurt (400som) in the front garden. The son is also a capable guide.

Hotel Amir (☎ 5 13 15; info@hotelamir.kg; Ayni 78; s/d US\$39/56, baby's cot/child's bed US\$15; 📺) Opened in 2006 this hotel fills a void in the midpriced market, offering simple but bright and cheerful rooms with *ala-kiyiz* wall hangings and queen-sized beds. It has its own power generator and a rather plain café. Breakfast is included.

Eating

Traktiry Kalinka (☎ 2 77 77; Jusup Abdrakhmanov 99; dishes 30som; 🍷 lunch & dinner, closed Sun) The grumpy service here doesn't mar the cosy décor, good selection of salads and cold draught beer. Look for the pretty Russian façade.

Arzu Café (☎ 2 39 99; Kushtobaev 17; mains 30-80som; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Has good vegetarian options

that are very filling and popular with locals at lunchtime. Nonvegetarians might try the *breizol* (55som) – battered meat rolled around tomatoes and other vegetables.

Fakir Café (☎ 2 06 56; cnr Gorkogo & Kushtobaev; mains 60som; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Offers a wide selection of dishes from Uyghur to Georgian, inside and outside seating, English menus, friendly staff and decent portions.

Kench Café (☎ 2 07 07; cnr Telmona & Gebze; meal 120som; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of the better restaurants in town, in the southern outskirts and with an English menu. The chicken with mushroom sauce is recommended.

You'll also find Dungan snacks such as *ash-lyanfu* (meatless, cold, gelatine noodles in a vinegary sauce) in the Al-Tilek Bazaar for only a few som. It can be quite spicy so watch the red stuff. The best Dungan food is of course in Dungan homes, where a slap-up meal may have eight to 10 courses (Dungan weddings can have up to 30 courses). Yak Tours (p302) can arrange a good **Dungan feast** (per person US\$6-10) if you can get a group together.

Shopping

Kürk Art Gallery (Jakshilik Bazaar) Has some nice, neutral-coloured *shyrdaks* and an interesting collection of *voilochnaya shapka* – felt hats worn in *banyas* to bring the sweat out.

The **Kumtor Department Store** (TsUM; Toktogul) has some made-for-tourist items.

Jamilya's B&B sells and custom orders *shyrdaks* and is affiliated to Kyrgyz Style (p288) in Bishkek. Place an order, travel around central Kyrgyzstan for a week or two, and then pick up the finished product.

Getting There & Away

Karakol's **long-distance bus station** (Przhevalskogo) has a mix of comfortable modern buses and tired Soviet-era buses to Bishkek (190som, eight hours) hourly between 7am and 3pm, and at night between 8pm and 11pm. These stop in Cholpon-Ata (80som) and Balykchy (110som) following the northern shore route.

Out in front of the long-distance bus station are faster *arenda* (buses that leave when full; 200som) and shared taxis (450som) to Bishkek. There is one bus a day in summer to Almaty (450som) but note that this runs via Bishkek not the Karkara Valley.

Buses also run via the southern shore from the **southern bus stand** (Toktogul) to Bishkek four

times daily and will drop you at Barskoön (55som), Tamga (60som), Bokonbayevo (80som) and Balykchy (120som). The first scheduled departure is at 9.30am, the last at 3.30pm. For Naryn and Kochkor, change at Balykchy.

Minibuses and shared taxis also depart from here for all southern-shore destinations when full.

Most local buses (eg to Pristan Prahevalsk, Ak-Suu, Jeti-Öghüz and Barskoön) go from the local bus stand in the centre of town, at the Ak Tilek Bazaar. You will also find taxis here for local hire around the region, but agree on a price and waiting time beforehand.

Flights to Bishkek and Osh remain suspended although the airline ticketing office at the airport can sell tickets departing from Bishkek or Osh airports.

Getting Around

Marshrutka minibuses trundle back and forth between the bus station and the centre. Taxis are fairly plentiful and cost around 50som in

town, 60som at night. You can book a taxi at **Salam Taxis** (☎ 2 22 22) or **Issyk-Kul Taxis** (☎ 161).

Minibus 103 runs a loop through the centre and around town.

AROUND KARAKOL Przewalski Memorial & Pristan Prahevalsk

Thanks perhaps to the efforts of Soviet historiographers, and to the fact that he died here, the Russian explorer Nikolai Przewalski (below) is something of a local icon, an increasingly poignant reminder of what the Russians accomplished in this part of the world. His grave and memorial museum are 7km north of Karakol on the Mikhaylovka Inlet. A visit with a Russian guide still has the flavour of a pilgrimage.

The **museum** (Muzey Prezhezhwalskovo; admission 50som) features a huge map of Przewalski's explorations in Central Asia and a gallery of exhibits on his life and travels, plus a roll call of other Russian explorers. Captions are in

PRZEWALSKI

The golden age of Central Asian exploration was presided over by Nikolai Mikhailovich Przewalski. Born in Smolensk on 12 April 1839, his passion for an early age was travel. His father was an army officer and young Nikolai, under heavy pressure to be one too, apparently decided that an army career would give him the best chance to hit the road, although he never enjoyed the military life.

To prove to both the Russian Geographical Society and his senior officers that he would be a good explorer, he persuaded the Society to sponsor his first expedition, to the Ussuri River region in the Russian Far East from 1867 to 1869. The results impressed everyone, the Society agreed to help finance future trips, and the army gave him the time he needed, insisting only that on his return from each trip he be debriefed first before saying anything to the Society.

Przewalski's Faustian bargain gave him his freedom to travel in return for being, in effect, an army agent. He never married, going on instead to become a major general and the most honoured of all the tsarist explorers. He focused on Central Asia, launching four major expeditions in 15 years:

- Mongolia, China and Tibet (1870–73)
- Tian Shan, Lop Nor, Taklamakan Desert and northern Xinjiang (1876–77)
- Mongolia, China and Tibet (1879–80)
- Mongolia, China, Tibet, Taklamakan Desert and Tian Shan (1883–85)

Those starting in Mongolia were devoted to finding a route into Tibet. On the one non-Tibet trip, he discovered the tiny steppe-land horse that now bears his name – Przewalski's horse (p76).

On the last of these trips he arrived via the Bedel Pass at Karakol. In 1888 he was at Bishkek (then Pishpek) outfitting for his next, grandest, expedition. While hunting tiger by the Chuy River he unwisely drank the water, came down with typhus and was bundled off to Lake Issyk-Köl for rest and treatment. From here he wrote to the tsar asking to be buried beside the lake, dressed in his explorer's clothes. He died at the military hospital on 20 October 1888.

Russian. There is usually an English-speaking guide on duty, delightful in her earnest explanations. Look out for the murals that change perspective from different angles.

The grave and monument overlook the Mikhailovka Inlet and a clutter of cranes, docks and warehouses – all once part of the old Soviet top-secret ‘polygon’ for torpedo research. **Pristan** (Russian for pier) is a nearby strip of lakeshore several kilometres long that includes a sea of *dachas* (holiday bungalows) to the northeast and a popular beach to the west. The old military zone villages of Mikhailovka, Lipenka and certain parts of Pristan Prahevsk are off limits to foreigners.

To get here on your own, take a public bus (8som to 10som) or a shared taxi (15som)

marked Дачи (Dachi) or Пляж Плаж (Beach) from Karakol just north of the local bus stand, departing every hour or so. A taxi to the museum costs 100som one way.

Altyn Arashan

Probably the most popular destination from Karakol is a spartan hot spring development called Altyn Arashan (Golden Spa), set in a postcard-perfect alpine valley at 3000m, with 4260m Pik Palatka looming at its southern end.

Much of the area is a botanical research area called the Arashan State Nature Reserve and is home to about 20 snow leopards and a handful of bears, although the only animals you’re likely to see are the horses and sheep belonging to local families.

During Soviet times it is rumoured that 25 snow leopards were trapped here and shipped to zoos around the world until Moscow cancelled all collecting and hunting permits in 1975.

Altyn Arashan has several small **hot-spring developments** (US\$1-52). Natural hot water flows into a series of concrete pools enclosed by wooden sheds. The pools reek of sulphur but there is a translated certificate pinned to the door extolling the curative properties of these waters and listing, in exhaustive detail, the diseases they will cure.

Each shed is lockable and you can get the key from the house closest to whichever shed you select. It is a great way to relax and it’s almost mandatory to run, screaming, into the icy river afterwards.

Across the stream is a little log house and museum with stuffed animals of the region. From the springs it’s about a five hour walk on foot to the snout of the Palatka Glacier, wrapped around Pik Palatka.

SLEEPING & EATING

Yak Tours Camp (dm 400som, with 3 meals 600som) The first place you come to is run by Karakol’s Yak Tours. The communal lounge has an atmospheric open fire but the bedding upstairs is usually dirty. On nights when the guide, Valentin, stays the food is excellent, at other times, less so and occasionally meals are dispensed with altogether. There are no hot springs here.

Arashan Travel Hotel (incl hot pool usage dm 250som, yurt 400som) The next along from Yak Tours and a small step up in cleanliness; the beds are however, in large dorms. Staff can also organise guides and horses and run a small shop selling essentials (Snickers bars, Coke and toilet paper). Meals are 80som to 200som and the hot pools cost 50som.

There are six families that take guests, but none of the six have phones in the valley. If one place is full, they will refer you to the next.

By far your best option is to take a tent and camp somewhere undisturbed. You can buy a few things here in summer but it’s better to bring your own food (and purifying tablets for the water), plus a bit of tea, salt, sugar or coffee for the caretaker.

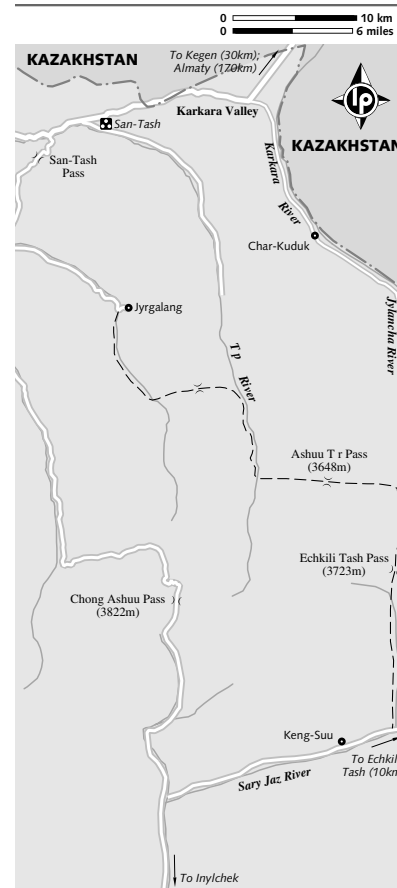
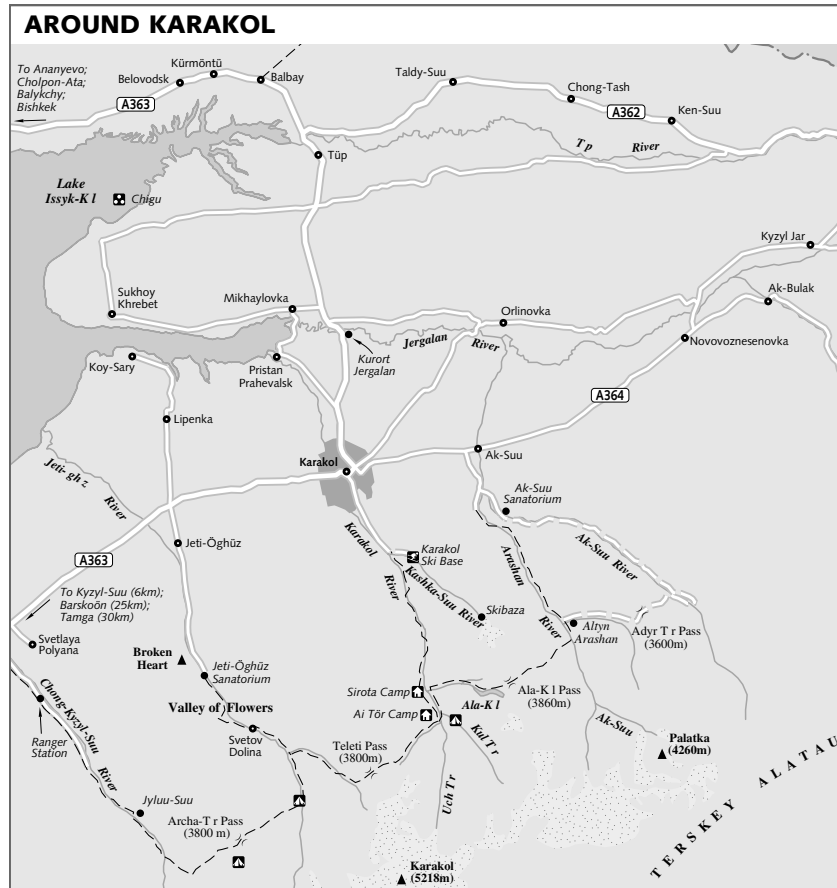
GETTING THERE & AWAY

An avalanche-prone road, strewn with rocks and winter debris, makes for a slow crawl up to the springs by 4WD. A taxi (200som) or minibus 358 (10som) can drop you at the turn-off to Ak-Suu Sanatorium. From here it’s a steep, five-to-six-hour (14km) climb south on the 4WD track beside the Arashan River, through a piney canyon full of hidden hot and cold springs.

Valentin of Yak Tours will bring you up to Altyn Arashan from Karakol in his jeep for about US\$25 per 4WD. The TIC or CBT in Karakol can arrange transport for a similar fee. There’s little traffic so hitching is hit and miss. You can hike in as the climax of several possible treks to/from the Karakol Valley (see p308).

Karakol Valley

Due south of Karakol lies the beautiful Karakol Valley. The valley is a national park, which means there’s a 250som entry fee collected at the gate.



TREKKING AROUND KARAKOL

The Terskey Alatau range that rises behind Karakol offers a fine taste of the Tian Shan. Of numerous possible routes that climb to passes below 4000m, the best of them take in the alpine lake Ala-Köl above Karakol and the Altyn Arashan (p306) hot springs above Ak-Suu (Teploklyuchenka).

Ak-Suu to Altyn Arashan & Back

Minimum one or two nights. Five hours up the Arashan Valley, climbing from 1800m to 3000m. A day-hike extension could take you 4½ hours further up the valley, branching east and then south for views of Palatka (4260m).

Karakol Valley to Arashan Valley, via Ala-Köl

Minimum three nights. Hike up from the end of the bus 1 route for about four hours to where the Ala-Köl Valley branches to the left. Two hours up takes you to the carved wooden Sirota camp; another five hours takes you past waterfalls to the high-altitude and barren Ala-Köl lake. A 30-minute walk along the north shore offers camping at the base of the pass. The trail to the 3860m Ala-Köl Pass is indistinct and the crossing can be tricky at the end of the season, so consider a guide from September onwards. Five hours downhill from the pass brings you to Altyn Arashan, from where you can hike down to Ak-Suu the next day.

Jeti-Öghüz to Altyn Arashan, via the Karakol Valley

Minimum four or five nights. The trail heads up the Jeti-Öghüz river valley, crossing east over the 3800m Teleti Pass into the Karakol Valley. From here head up to Ala-Köl, and then over to Altyn Arashan and Ak-Suu (see above).

Kyzyl-Suu to Altyn Arashan, via the Jeti-Öghüz & Karakol Valleys

Minimum six to eight nights. From Kyzyl-Suu head up the Chong-Kyzyl-Suu Valley to the Jyluu-Suu hot springs or on to a camp site below the 3800m Archa-Tör Pass. Next day cross the pass, head down the Asan Tukum Gorge into the Jeti-Öghüz Valley. From here it's over the Teleti Pass to the Karakol Valley and to Ala-Köl, Altyn Arashan and Ak-Suu, as described previously.

You can combine any number of these parallel valleys to make as long a trek as you like. You can also add on wonderful radial hikes up the valleys, for example from Altyn Arashan to Pik Palatka or up the Kul Tör Valley at the head of the Karakol Valley for views of Karakol Peak (5218m).

There are also longer, more technical variations on these that climb as high as 4200m and cross some small glaciers, but these should not be attempted without a knowledgeable guide and some experience with glacier walking.

When to Go

The season for the treks noted here is normally late June to early October. August is a popular time for picking mushrooms; blackcurrants are in season in September. For Altyn Arashan only, you could go as early as May or as late as the end of October, but nights drop below freezing then and the surrounding mountain passes are snowed over. Locals say that Altyn Arashan is loveliest in June and in September.

Weather is the region's biggest danger, with unexpected chilling storms, especially May to June, and September to October. Streams are in flood in late May and early June; if you go then, plan your crossings for early morning when levels are lowest.

Maps

These routes are indicated on the map (pp306–7). The newly published 1:100,000 *South-East Issyk-Köl Lake Coast Trekking Map* shows all these routes and is sold at the TIC in Karakol (p302) and Geoid in Bishkek (p279) for 250som.

Getting to the Trail Heads

For access to trail heads, refer to the Altyn Arashan (p306), Karakol Valley (p307) and Jeti-Öghüz (opposite) sections of this chapter.

TREKKING

The valley offers some fine hikes (see opposite), although you really need to invest in a tent, stove and a day's hiking before the valley reveals its charm. Further up the main valley, at the junction of several valleys and trekking routes is the Ai Tör camp, run by Alp Tour Issyk Köl (p303), with shower, *banya* (US\$3), tent sites (100som), mountain rescue, radio service and park permit check.

From May to mid-October you can make a strenuous day hike (or better an overnight camping trip) to a crystal-clear lake called Ala-Köl (3530m). You can also reach this lake in four hours over the ridge from Altyn Arashan; in fact this is on several alternative trek routes to/from Altyn Arashan (see opposite).

A taxi from Karakol to the park gate is 50som. Bus 1 will take you part of the way, from where you can start hiking or hitching.

SKIING

About 17km south of Karakol, the Kashka-Suu valley becomes the area's winter playland of snow and ice. The season kicks off at the end of November and runs to March although canny locals sometimes get an additional two weeks worth of skiing in May when avalanches create temporary ski fields.

In 2005 a Russian-Kyrgyz construction company revamped the tiny resort, modernising the facilities and injecting new life into the tired complex. It still has a way to go though.

Karakol Ski Base (☎ Bishkek 312-53 18 70, Karakol 3922-5 14 54; www.karakol-ski.com; lift pass adult/child US\$8/4, ski kit/snowboard rental US\$10/12, guided ski tour US\$12) operates five T-bar tows (only one was operational in the 2006 season) to a height of 3040m and one sledge drag. Together they access over 20km of trails. Most trails run through coniferous fir woodlands and the guided, winter forest ski tours are a magical experience. Thanks to the recent cash injection, the rental equipment has gone from the stuff Scott might have used to cross the Antarctic to brand-spanking-new Rossignols.

Karakol Ski Resort (d/tw/apt US\$40/40/60, chalet US\$150) operates the Karakol Ski Base and the only accommodation on the mountain itself. There are a total of six doubles, four triples and two apartments (each with two bedrooms) within the hotel and two A-frame chalets that each sleeps eight to 10 people. The rooms are basic but comfortable, all with

TV and en suite. There is also an attached restaurant (three meals US\$10).

The other option is to stay in Karakol town, and hire a 4WD to take you up to the ski base. The TIC (p302) and many of the trekking companies (p303) can arrange this, but be sure to negotiate waiting time if you want a lift down. For heli-skiing see p293.

Jeti-Öghüz

About 25km west of Karakol, at the mouth of the Jeti-Öghüz Canyon, is an extraordinary natural red sandstone cliffs that has become a kind of tourism trademark for Lake Issyk-Köl.

Jeti-Öghüz village is just off the main around-the-lake road. South of the village the earth erupts in red patches, and soon there appears a great splintered hill called Razbitoye Serdtse or **Broken Heart**. Legend says two suitors spilled their blood in a fight for a beautiful woman; both died, and this rock is her broken heart.

The other side of the hill forms the massive wall of Jeti-Öghüz. The name means **Seven Bulls** (named after the seven main bluffs), and of course there is a story here too – of seven calves growing big and strong in the valley's rich pastures. Erosion has meant that the bulls have multiplied. They are best viewed from a ridge to the east above the road. From that same ridge you can look east into Ushchelie Drakonov, the Valley of Dragons.

Below the wall of Seven Bulls is one of Issyk-Köl's surviving spas, the ageing **Jeti-Öghüz Sanatorium** (☎ 9 37 19; s 170som, massage 200som; ☞ summer only), built in 1932 with a complex of several plain hotels, a half-empty, semiheated pool, a restaurant (meals 100som) and some woodland walks. Former Russian president Boris Yeltsin and former Kyrgyzstan president Askar Akaev had their first meeting here in 1991 – and it has been downhill ever since. Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin also decompressed here. It's the kind of place that's full of history and makes you want to jam the chair under the doorknob when you sleep.

From here you can walk up the parklike lower canyon of the Jeti-Öghüz River to popular summer picnic spots. Some 5km up, the valley opens out almost flat at **Svetov Dolina**, the Valley of Flowers (Kok Jayik in Kyrgyz); it's a kaleidoscope of colours in May when the poppies bloom. There are also said to be

pre-Islamic petroglyphs up here, similar to those at Cholpon-Ata.

The **Festival of National Cuisine & Folklore** is held in the yurt camp in the Jeti-Öghüz gorge on the last Sunday in July. It is a good opportunity to sample Kyrgyz, Tartar, Russian and Dungan specialties.

Yurt camps include the pleasant **Jenish Gol** (per person US\$10) on the left of the road, Ecotrek (p303) on the right and finally the pricier **Saidahmat** (bed & full board €20). All are normally accessible by car and offer a nice taste of the mountains if you are short of time, and a good base for day hikes if you have a couple of days. Karakol TIC (p312) and CBT (p302) can advise on prices and help with bookings. The upper valley is accessed by five bridges that sometimes get washed out so check the best route with locals before setting off.

Jeti-Öghüz canyon is one of several alternatives for treks to/from Alтын Arashan and Ala-Köl (p308).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run from Karakol's local bus stand at 10am to Jeti-Öghüz village and at 4pm to the sanatorium (25som), 6km further away. Shared taxis (50som) and a noon minibus (40som) also run between Karakol's Ak Tilek Bazaar and the sanatorium. To return from the sanatorium, stand by the main road and wave down the first car heading back to town; most drivers happily act as impromptu shared taxis.

A taxi from Karakol costs 280som to the spa, 350som to the Valley of Flowers and around 500som to the yurt camps at the top of the valley.

BARSKOÖN & TAMGA БАРСКООН & ТАМГА

☎ 3926

Barskoön village was an army staging point in the days of Soviet–Chinese border skirmishes, and the small adjacent settlement of Tamga is built around a former military sanatorium, now open year-round to all. Today Barskoön is all Kyrgyz, with more horses than cars; Tamga is mainly Russian.

The area's most illustrious resident was the 11th-century Mahmud al-Kashgari, the author of the first-ever comparative dictionary of Turkic languages, *Divan Lughat at-Turk* (A Glossary of Turkish Dialects), written in Baghdad during 1072–74.

Sights & Activities

Shepherds Way Trekking (☎ 29 74 06, Bishkek 312-29 74 06, Barskoön 2 61 33; www.kyrgyztrek.com) is a very professional local company that runs horse treks into the mountains behind Barskoön. It's run by local brothers Ishen and Raiymbek Obelbekov and Ishen's wife, Gulmira.

Shepherds Way Trekking also helped host the 2005 inaugural **At Chabysh (Horse Racing) Festival** (Kyrgyz Ate Foundation; ☎ 502-518315; www.at-chabysh.com) held in early November. By hosting a series of horse games and races the festival aims to promote the breeding of the Kyrgyz horse, which along with its associated nomadic traditions is now faced with extinction. The feature event is raced over a gruelling 47km course between Barskoön and Tosor villages.

In Barskoön you can see yurts in production at the **Ak Orgo yurt workshop** (☎ 9 67 54; Lenin 93; mekenbek@hotmail.kg), including machines that make felt and devices that bend the wood and reeds for the curved yurts. It takes the 27 employees two months to make a yurt, which retail here at around US\$4500. The workshop is on the right as you drive into Barskoön from the east. Contact Mekenbek Osmonaliev.

Locals pack picnics and head 20km up the huge Barskoön Valley to the **Barskoön Waterfall**, where *kymyz* is sold from summertime yurts near a defaced inscription by Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. It's possible to climb 1½ hours up to closer views of the falls. Shared taxis (160som return) run from Barskoön sanatorium to the falls along the well-maintained road that leads to the Kumtor gold mine.

The Canadian gold-mining company Centarra Gold operates the **Kumtor Gold Mine**, the eighth-largest gold field in the world in the mountains behind Barskoön. There are no tours of the operations, presumably as result of environmental concerns (p278) and you'll need a special invitation to get past the various checkpoints. The gold mine is at 4200m and even in summer it snows regularly.

Tamga has a nice beach and locals recommend a beach 5km west. Also, 6km up the valley there is a Tibetan inscription known as **Tamga Tash** but you'll need local help to find it.

The Tamga Guesthouse arranges one- to three-day treks or horse trips up to the Tamga Gorges or Ochincheck Lake, or a four-day trip to Chakury Köl at a lofty 3800m.

Sleeping

Tamga Guesthouse (☎ 9 53 33; Ozyornaya 3; per person €8, full board €15) In Tamga village, this is run by a friendly Russian couple, and has a lovely fruit garden and sauna (US\$2 per person). It's used mostly by trekkers from the affiliated Kyrgyz Travel but anyone can stay and use it as a trekking base. It's the first road on the right as you pull into town. Contact Denikin Alexandr.

Dostuck Trekking (p284) has a **yurt camp** (full board US\$18) by the lakeshore near Tosor village.

Getting There & Away

Barskoön is about 90km west of Karakol, with daily buses to/from Karakol (55som) and Balykchy. Buses from Karakol to Barskoön leave at 9.30am, noon, 4pm and 5pm from the southern bus stand and there are more frequent minibuses (70som), which leave when full. A private taxi to Karakol costs 1000som and to Kadji-Sai 350som.

KADJI-SAI КАДЖИ-САИ

☎ 3941 / pop 4500

Surrounded by low, wind-and-water-carved canyons, Kadji-Sai makes for a convenient midway point between Bishkek and Karakol. In 1947 Kadji-Sai became somewhat of a 'Soviet secret' when uranium was mined here by Soviet Russia; at that time the town had no official name but was simply referred to as Frunze (after the capital) 10. The uranium, however, was of poor quality and the mine closed three years later.

The town is set 3km back from the main road that runs the length of Issyk-Köl. Minibuses will drop you near the petrol station, cafés and TIC on the main road; from here it is a 10som taxi ride up to the village.

The second **TIC** (☎ 9 25 61; asan-77@mail.ru; Ozyornaya 1; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, closed Jan) to open in Kyrgyzstan does an excellent job putting travellers in touch with yurt camps, homestays, eagle hunters and local guides to local sights. It also sells a 1:200,000 Russian topographical map (300som) of the region.

Sights

There are no must-sees in Kadji-Sai although the TIC can recommend a number of short treks to local geological formations including the **Kydyrmdjar Gorge** and **Skazka Rocks** – pillars of rock sculptured by the elements. The 14km

taxi ride here will cost 600som including waiting time and swimming stops along the way.

The local **eagle hunter** (☎ 9 21 37; Sportivnaya 6), Ishenbek, in addition to running Zina's B&B, guides horseback hunting trips (5000som per group; plus horse hire, 400som per person) into the surrounding hillside in search of wild rabbits and foxes. Ishenbek will also put on hunting demonstrations using domesticated rabbits reared for food (2000som per group) but be warned, it's not pretty for the bunny.

Sleeping

B&B Valeria (☎ 9 22 54; Gagarina 29; dm 300som) Run by the local apiculturist who will show you his 80 or so hives when they are in town – every autumn the bees are brought down from the *jailoos*. Besides delicious honey (served with the included breakfast) you can expect fresh fruits and vegetables from the garden. Additional meals cost 150som.

Zina's B&B (☎ 9 21 37; Sportivnaya 6; dm without/with meals 200/400som) The star attraction here is Kydyrov, a five-year-old hunting eagle and his handler, Ishenbek, who is happy to explain the rearing and training of eagles. The eagle is fully trained and will not attack children or domesticated pets. Three meals cost an additional 200som.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses, buses and shared taxis will stop at the intersection of the main road between Balykchy (minibus 90som) and Karakol (minibus 70som) and the road that leads to town. Taxis also wait here to ferry passengers the 3km to town.

BOKONBAYEVO БОКОНБАЕВО

☎ 3947 / pop 12,500

There doesn't seem to be much going on in sleepy Bokonbayevo. Community-Based Tourism's promotional booklet describes it as 'much overlooked' and at first it's easy to see why but scratch below the surface and you'll find a bustling Kyrgyz community worthy of closer inspection. Ditch this guide in your hotel room and spend an afternoon wandering the streets and meeting the locals – we were invited to take alarmingly graphic photos of a sheep being slaughtered then butchered with a kitchen knife; it wasn't pretty.

Most of the town's activity is centred along Bolot Mambetov where the local minibuses

and shared taxis arrive and depart from. There is a string of shops, a small bazaar, a smaller police office, CBT and a mosque all within this block. If you are not eating at your homestay, the café 100m from CBT serves up a fine *laghman* (40som) along with other Kyrgyz staples.

Information

CBT (☎ office 9 31 66, home 9 13 12; reservation@cbt.kyrgyzstan.kg; Bolot Mambetov; 📍 10am–5pm Mon–Fri summer) In addition to homestays this office operates three yurtstays around town and can arrange treks, horse treks and eagle hunting demonstrations. Contact Bakyt Choitonbaev.

Sights & Activities

There are several trekking opportunities in the nearby Terskey Alatau mountains and Konur Ölöñ Valley. Community-Based Tourism can advise on trails and arrange yurtstays. For the adventurous it is possible to trek to Naryn from here.

The local **eagle hunter** (1–3 people 1100som, group 1500som), Talgar, and his eagle, Tumara, put on a deadly demonstration in a field on the outskirts of town. If you wish, insist that you want the whole shebang with the sacrificial rabbit as opposed to a piece of meat tied to a string. On all accounts Tumara isn't too excited by the meat-on-a-string routine. Organise demonstrations through CBT.

The **Birds of Prey Festival** is worth a visit if you are in the area in early August when falconers from around Issyk-Köl compete here with their eagles, hawks and falcons. Although this festival is still in its infancy there are plans to include Kyrgyz hunting-dog demonstrations soon. Contact CBT for exact dates.

Sleeping

Asanakunova Jyldyz Homestay (☎ 9 14 12; Osmoev 35; dm 350) It's a five-minute walk from the town centre and run by a large but quiet extended family who will mainly leave you to your own devices. Breakfast is included, additional meals are 100som.

Hotel Paxat (☎ 9 16 31; cnr Turusbekov & Atakan) The owners of the only hotel in Bokonbayevo were out of town at time of research but neighbours assured us that it does open regularly.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses run to Tamga (40som), Balykchy (80som) and Karakol (90som) from opposite (east bound) and to the left (west bound) of

the CBT. Shared taxis charge 180som to Karakol and 280som to Bishkek.

AROUND BOKONBAYEVO & KADJI-SAI

Both the CBT in Bokonbayevo and the TIC in Kadji-Sai arrange trips to the local sights.

For a Dead Sea-like swimming experience try the buoyant but eye-stinging salty waters of **Shor-Köl**, 40km west of Bokonbayevo. It's best reached by taxi (1500som return from Kadji-Sai).

If you find yourself still lacking in spirit and health, locals suggest climbing to the sacred summit of Tastar-Ata, to drink from the large **Stone Pot** you'll find there. According to local folklore the pot was used by Manas himself while in residence and the stone pillars found in the area are referred to as the **Forty Soldiers of Manas**. The grassy south side makes an easier accent than the forested north side.

Yurtstays

Community-Based Tourism Bokonbayevo (left) operates a yurtstay at Bel Tam, 17km from Bokonbayevo, beyond Tuura-Su.

During the summer, Kadji-Sai TIC (p311) can arrange stays in, and treks from, several fledgling yurt camps (full board 350som) in the mountain *jailoos* and along the shores of Issyk-Köl.

Ecotour (p282) has full-service yurts at neighbouring Temir Kanat and at Tuura-Su village at the west end of the Kongur Ölöñ Valley.

THE CENTRAL TIAN SHAN ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫЙ ТЯНЬ ШАНЬ

This highest and mightiest part of the Tian Shan system – the name means Celestial Mountains in Chinese – is at the eastern end of Kyrgyzstan, along its borders with China and the very southeast tip of Kazakhstan. It's an immense knot of ranges, with dozens of summits over 5000m, culminating in Pik Pobedy (Victory Peak, 7439m, second-highest in the former USSR) on the Kyrgyzstan–China border, and Khan Tengri (Prince of Spirits or Ruler of the Sky, 7010m), possibly the most beautiful and demanding peak in the Tian Shan, on the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border. Locals call the latter peak 'Blood Mountain', as the pyramid-shaped peak glows crimson at sunset.

The first foreigner to bring back information about the central Tian Shan was the

Chinese explorer Xuan Zang (602–64), who crossed the Bedel Pass in the 7th century, early in his 16-year odyssey to India and back. His journey nearly ended here; in the seven days it took to cross the pass, half of his 14-person party froze to death.

The first European to penetrate this high region was the Russian explorer Pyotr Semenov in 1856 (for his efforts the tsar awarded him the honorary name Tian-Shansky). In 1902–03 the Austrian explorer Gottfried Merzbacher first approached the foot of the elegant, Matterhorn-like Khan Tengri, but it was only climbed in 1931, by an Ukrainian team.

Of the Tian Shan's thousands of glaciers, the grandest is 60km-long Inylchek (Engilchek), rumbling westward from both sides of Khan Tengri, embracing an entire rampart of giant peaks and tributary glaciers. Across the glacier's northern arm, where it joins the southern arm, a huge, iceberg-filled

lake – Merzbacher Lake – forms at 3300m every summer. Some time in early August, the lake bursts its ice-banks and explodes into the Inylchek River below.

Along with the eastern Pamir, the central Tian Shan is Central Asia's premier territory for serious trekking and mountaineering. Several Central Asian adventure-travel firms will bring you here by helicopter, 4WD and/or foot right up to these peaks. Even intrepid, fit, do-it-yourselfers can get a look at Inylchek Glacier (below).

Information

Mid-July to August is the only feasible season to visit as at these elevations winter temperatures around the glacier are –15°C during the day and –25°C at night.

The best book to take along is Frith Maier's comprehensive *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia*, which has several maps and basic route descriptions for this region.

TREKKING TO THE INYLCHEK GLACIER

The most common trekking route to the Inylchek Glacier is the remote and wild five- or six-day trek from Jyrgalang, 70km east of Karakol. Most trekkers will need support for this trek, not least because you will need a military permit from Karakol to head up the Sary Jaz Valley. There's one daily bus from Karakol to Jyrgalang.

Stage one From Jyrgalang the trail heads south up the valley, before cutting east over a 2800m pass into the Tüp Valley (seven to eight hours).

Stage two Over the 3648m Ashuu Tör Pass into the Janalach Valley (six hours).

Stage three Head south over the 3723m Echkili-Tash Pass into the Sary Jaz Valley.

Stage four Seven hours hike up the Tüz Valley to camp at the junction of the Achik Tash River.

Stage five Cross the river and head up four hours to the tricky Tüz Pass (4001m), from where there are stunning views of the Inylchek Glacier and Nansen Peak. From here it's a long descent to the Chong-Tash site at the snout of the Inylchek Glacier.

It's possible to hire a 4WD (5000som from the CBT in Karakol) to the yak farm in Echkili-Tash and join the trek there, leaving only two or three days to reach Chong-Tash. From Chong-Tash you face a one- or two-day hike back west to Ak-Jailoo or Maida Adyr camp and Inylchek town.

To continue from Chong-Tash on to the Inylchek Glacier you definitely need the support of a trekking agency to guide you over the glacier, keep you in supplies and let you stay in its base camps. With an experienced guide it's possible to continue from Chong-Tash over the glacier for one long day to Merzbacher Lake and to continue the next day to the camps. A popular excursion for trekking groups based here is to make a trekking ascent of Mt Diky (4832m) or Pesni Abaji (4901m), or to hike up the Vozdochka Glacier to the foot of Pik Pobedy (7439m). Most groups take in a stunning helicopter route around the valley and out to Inylchek town and you might be able to buy a ride back up to Inylchek for US\$150.

The best time for trekking in this region is July and August. See p314 for information on permits, maps and agencies.

PERMITS

To go into the sensitive border zone past Inylchek town or anywhere in the upper Sary Jaz Valley you need a military border permit (*propusk*) from the permit station of the Russian border detachment stationed at the army base of Karakol's original garrison. Trekking agencies normally need a week to 20 days (US\$15) to arrange this but can do it in a day (US\$25).

You must have a letter with the stamp of a recognised travel agency in Karakol, Bishkek or Almaty, a list of everyone in your party and your itinerary. To climb in the region you'll need a mountaineering permit, which trekking companies can get you for US\$105.

Dangers & Annoyances

This is not a place to pop into for a few days with your summer sleeping bag – be properly equipped against the cold, which is severe at night, even in summer, and give yourself plenty of time to acclimatise to the altitude.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several base camps in the Inylchek Valley: en route at scruffy Maida Adyr and the newer, nicer Gribkov Camp at Ak-Jailoo, 20km nearer the glacier; as well as at several locations up on the glacier in tent-towns owned and run by ITMC Tien-Shan, Ak-Sai Travel and Dostuck Trekking (see p284) in Bishkek and Kan Tengri in Almaty, among others. The Ak-Jailoo camp is run by **Tour Khan Tengri** (☎ in Karakol 3922-2 72 69; www.travelkg.narod.ru/company.htm) and has wooden buildings (per person US\$20), yurts (US\$12) and camp space (US\$2 to US\$10), plus meals (US\$4 to US\$7). ITMC's camp costs around US\$3 per night in a tent, or US\$8 in huts and there's a sauna and bar. You can camp here and just pay for meals, although food is pricey.

Kan Tengri maintains the only camp on the north side of the glacier and also a yurt camp at 2200m at the edge of the Karkara Valley. All these are intended for trekkers and climbers, but anybody with the urge to see this cathedral of peaks can make arrangements with those firms, and pay a visit.

Getting There & Away

Bishkek trekking agencies (p284) organising climbs and treks in the central Tian Shan include Dostuck Trekking, Edelweiss, ITMC

Tien-Shan, Ak-Sai and Tien-Shan Travel in Bishkek; Turkestan (p302) and Alp Tour Issyk-Kul (p303) in Karakol; and Kan Tengri and Tour Asia in Almaty (p118).

Access to the region surrounding Khan Tengri is by road, air or on foot. It's a four-hour (150km) trip on a roller-coaster, all-weather road from Karakol via Inylchek town, a mining centre at about 2500m and 50km west of the snout of the Inylchek Glacier. Do-it-yourselfers could hire a UAZ Jeep from CBT Karakol, for around 5000som or a 4WD 15-seater from Alp Tour Issyk-Kul for US\$200. Even though maps show a road between Ak Shyrak and Inylchek, the last part of this road is no longer passable and access via this approach is by foot only. The new road to Ak-Jailoo has a US\$10 toll for jeeps, or US\$20 for trucks.

If you've got the cash, take a mind-boggling helicopter flight over the Tian Shan to Khan Tengri base camp with Kan Tengri from its Karkara Valley base camp, or with other agencies from Gribov Camp. It's possible to hitch a lift on a helicopter from Maida Adyr to the base camps for US\$100 (plus US\$1 per kilo if you have more than 30kg of luggage). These run every two days in August.

You can trek to Khan Tengri's north face from Narynkol (Kazakhstan), Jyrgalang (Kyrgyzstan) or, less interestingly, from the Ak-Jailoo road head.

CENTRAL KYRGYZSTAN

The mountainous heart of Kyrgyzstan offers travellers unrivalled opportunities to explore *jailoos* on foot, horseback or by 4WD. At every turn you will find a family offering to put you up for the night or a group of herdsmen who will eagerly invite you into their yurt for a cup of tea and a bowl of fresh yogurt. Add this to some of the world's most glorious alpine lakes and it is easy to see why central Kyrgyzstan now rivals Lake Issyk-Köl in the hearts and minds of travellers.

Until the opening of the Irkeshtam Pass (p339) in 2002 the only way eastward to China was via the problematic Torugart Pass (p325). The Torugart still remains a hit-and-miss undertaking; frequent border closures, unpredictable weather and the Chinese requirement for expensive prearranged trans-

port deters many overlanders from tackling this stunning route.

BISHKEK TO NARYN

The route begins as you would for Lake Issyk-Köl, winding up the **Shoestring Gorge** towards Balykchy before a short cut (by taxi) heads over a small pass and past the azure **Orto-Tokoy Reservoir**, effectively nipping off the Balykchy corner.

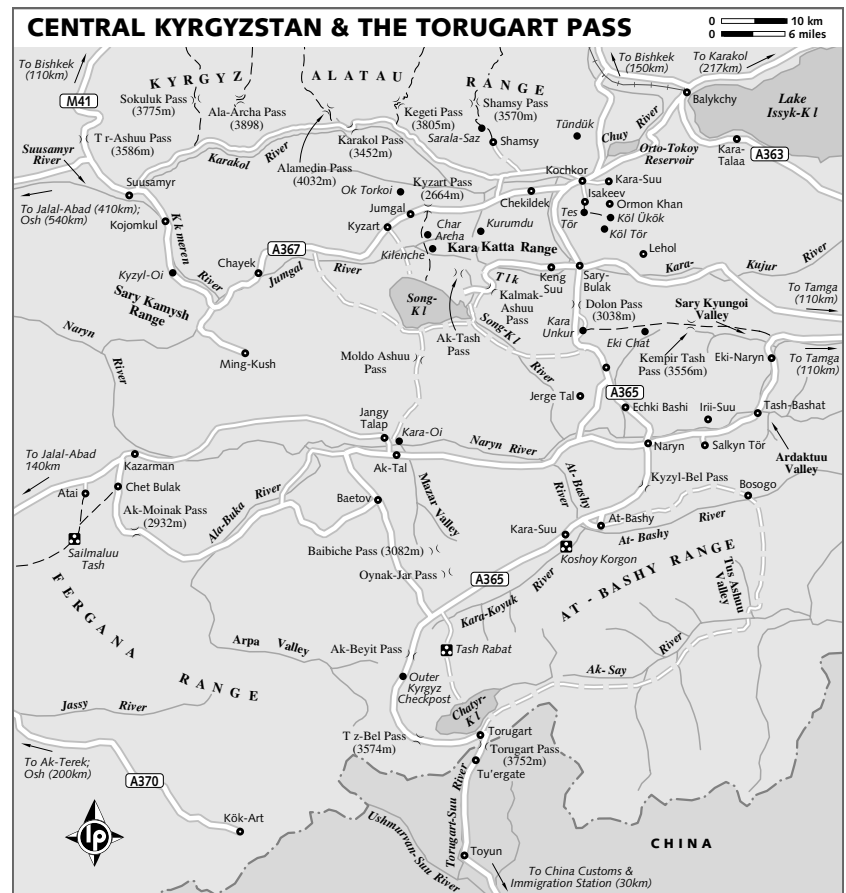
Three hours (185km) from Bishkek is the town of Kochkor (p316) and 38km past that, tiny **Sary-Bulak**, where you can buy *laghman* and snacks by the roadside. It's another 11km on to the 3038m summit of the **Dolon Pass**, the highest point on the Bishkek–Naryn road, and a further 16km to **Ottuk**, a tidy Kyrgyz settle-

ment. A further 24km brings you to a fork in the road – both branches of which take you the 10km into Naryn.

KARAKOL TO NARYN

This route follows the southern shores of Lake Issyk-Köl to Balykchy, winding between the barren, low rock escarpments that characterise this side of the lake.

From Bokombayevu the road heads inland passing the picturesque village of **Ak-Sai** with its haystacks, apple orchards and cemetery, whose graves sprout a multitude of Islamic stars and crescents, to **Balykchy**. Here you'll almost certainly need to switch minibuses to head south towards Kochkor. Ask to be dropped off at the southern bus stand on



the outskirts of Balykchy to catch a waiting south-bound shared taxi (50som to 70som) to Kochkor.

An alternative road that cuts between Tamga and Naryn is seldom used, requiring your own 4WD transport.

KOCHKOR КОЧКОП

☎ 3535 / pop 16,000 / elev 1800m

The little alpine, tree-lined, town of Kochkor (Kochkorka in Russian) is the kind of place where everyone seems to know everyone else. People and vehicles congregate around the roadside bazaar on Orozbekova. One side of the road has colourful vegetable stalls, the other side a clothes market. Taxi drivers whisper their destinations as you stroll pass as if surreptitiously selling drugs.

This Kyrgyz village is home to CBT and Shepherd's Life projects, and as such is a fine base from which to make trips to Song-Köl or the surrounding countryside and experience traditional life in the Kyrgyz *jailoos*.

Information

There's internet access in the **telephone office** (Orozbekova; per hr 30som; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat & Sun) and at **Aldagy Internet** (Isakeev 31; per min 0.5som; ☎ 9am-7pm), from where you can also send faxes.

CBT (☎ 2 23 55; cbt_kochkor@rambler.ru; Pioneerskaya 22A; ☎ 9am-8pm Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-5pm mid-Sep-May, closed noon-1pm) Arranges transport for 10som per kilometre, horses for 400som per day, guides for 800som (with their own horse) and B&B yurtstays in *jailoos* for 250som (or 450som for full board). A horse trek for two with one guide staying in yurts works out at around US\$30 per day. CBT can put you in touch with the folkloric musical group Min Kyal (1500som to 2000som). Contact Aida Jumashaeva.

Jailoo Tourist Community (Jailoo; ☎ 2 11 16; www.jailoo.com.kg; Orozbekova 125/3) The former CBT coordinator and English teacher, Asipa Jumabaeva, has set up her own business, offering similar services to CBT at similar prices. She is able to arrange homestays (400som per person including three meals), horses, guides and transport (Song-Köl 1800som, waiting 100som per day) and give directions to any of 10 *jailoos* in the surrounding valleys. The office has a good showroom for local *shyrdaks*; local producers fix the prices and Jailoo takes a 15% commission.

Kredobank (☎ 2 21 38; Orozbekova 133; ☎ 8am-noon, 1-5pm Mon-Fri) Will change cash US dollars and euro (when it has enough money!).

Shepherd's Life (☎ 2 14 23, Kuttuseyit uulu Shamen 111) Coordinator Mairam Ömürsakaeva offers

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similar services to CBT at similar prices but with slightly ropier arrangements. Cars rent for 9som per kilometre and a yurt B&B is 250som with meals an additional 100som. Mairam speaks Russian and Kyrgyz only but her son Urmat speaks excellent English. Like the other agencies, horse riding, luggage storage and guiding services can all be arranged here. She can also be found at Altny Kol woman's collective behind CBT where she works.

Sights & Activities

There's not much to do in the town except visit the small **regional museum** (admission 50som; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Sun-Fri). A fine yurt is on display along with a collection of local Kyrgyz crafts, plus all the usual Soviet-era local heroes such as the local scientist Bayaly Isakeev. More Soviet heroes are celebrated in the busts to the east of the museum.

There is also a good **livestock market** in town on Saturday morning.

Kochkor makes a good base for horse treks and yurtstays in the region.

Sleeping

There are more than 20 homestays in Kochkor, most costing 300som to 350som with breakfast, and CBT can put you in contact with all of them. The B&Bs listed here are mentioned in case the CBT office is closed. All include breakfast and serve home-cooked meals for an additional 100som.

Hotel (☎ 2 13 21; s/d 110/220som) This no-frills outfit offers simple rooms with two beds and old mattresses. There is only one duvet per bed so in cold weather you'll need to rug up before sleeping. There is an outside toilet but no showers. Unless you are desperately trying to save money the B&Bs are better options.

Guesthouse B&B (☎ 2 19 97; Shamen 14; dm 300som) It's a CBT-affiliated guesthouse with a central location and beds for five people. The grandmother here makes an apricot jam to die for and one of the daughters, Nargiz, speaks English.

Jumagul's B&B (☎ 2 24 53; Kuttuseyit uulu Shamen 58; dm 300som) Hosts Jumagul Akhmadova and her husband do a good job here, offering two large twin rooms. The B&B has a Russian sauna for guests and a clean squat toilet in the garden.

Shepherd's Life B&B (☎ 2 24 81, Kuttuseyit uulu Shamen 91; dm 300som) Considering that this is run by Shepherd's Life, the farmyard vibe is entirely appropriate. An orchard and stable separate the two main buildings – each have a selection of rooms; some with beds, others with *shyrdaks*.

Eating & Drinking

Café Vazit (☎ 2 17 60; Orozbekova; mains 50-90som; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Vazit is the best value in town, dishing up delicious, no-fuss meals with no-fuss names. The unappealingly christened 'Chinese meat' (65som) is a delicious, diced-beef stir-fry.

Café Baba-Ata (☎ 2 25 05; Orozbekova 125; mains 50-90som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Thanks to its central location, outside summer seating and DJ this café is popular with travellers although the menu is limited and the food only passable.

Men Disco (☎ 0502-948444; Park Seyil) Locals and travellers alike can get their freak on at this unfortunately named disco. The karaoke machine has Western and Russian pop so here's your chance to bring Guns n Roses to the Central Asian masses. Friday is dead as locals opt for the mosque instead.

Shopping

Kochkor is one of the best places to buy *shyrdaks*.

Altny Kol (Golden Hands; Pioneerskaya) This local women's collective has a *shyrdak* showroom next to the CBT office. A good-quality 1.6m by 2.25m rug will set you back 5000som. It can arrange airmail postage (8000som for this size) or delivery to either Osh or Bishkek.

Good-quality *shyrdaks* are also for sale at Jumagul's B&B and at Jailoo, which has a large selection of naturally dyed felt products using barberry, walnut, juniper, immortal and wormwood. A *shyrdak* here costs about US\$30 (natural colours), US\$35 (artificial dye) and US\$40 (natural colours using natural dyes) per square metre. The highly decorative, 10m-long *örmöks* (woven belts) that are wrapped around the insides of yurts (US\$30 per metre) are also sold here.

Getting There & Away

Most people take a seat in a shared taxi from opposite the bazaar to Bishkek (200som), Balykchy (60som, one hour) and Naryn (150som to 200som). Infrequent afternoon buses and minibuses pass through to Chayek (150som) and Ming Kush via Jumgal, picking up passengers by the bazaar at Orozbekova.

AROUND KOCHKOR

The following trips can all be arranged by CBT, Jailoo or Shepherd's Life. By yourself, you'll have difficulties finding yurtstay accommodation.

One of the most popular trips is to **Sarala-Saz** (53km northwest), a wide open *jailoo* with fine views, from where you can take day trips on horseback to petroglyphs. Community-Based Tourism organises **horse games** here in August. For dates ask at the CBT in Kochkor or Bishkek. An adventurous two- or three-day horse trek leads from Sarala-Saz over the 3570m Shamsy Pass and down the Shamsy River valley to Tokmak.

Köl Ükök (Treasure Chest) is a beautiful mountain lake above Tes Tör *jailoo*, south of Kochkor and is a recommended overnight or three-day trip. Take a taxi 6km to Isaakeev and then trek by horse or on foot half a day to the *jailoos*. Before June it's better to stay at Tes Tör (four hours from Isaakeev by horse); after June you can stay up by the lake (six hours from Isaakeev). Day excursions from the lake include the **Köl Tör** glacial lake, a couple of hours further up into the mountains. For a slightly longer alternative trip take a taxi 15km to Kara-Suu village and then go first to Kashang Bel or Bel Tepshay (Bel means pass), for views of Issyk-Köl, and then ride or hike the next day to Köl Ükök (seven hours).

If you really want to get off the beaten track, the **Shepherd's Life coordinator** (☎ 3522-41457; Lenin 22) in **Jumgal**, history teacher Stalbek Kaparbekov, can arrange horses to, and accommodation at, the nearby *jailoos* of Ok Torkoi and Kilenche. Jumgal is the first village after the Kyzart Pass, and is sometimes referred to as Dos Kulu. There are also Shepherd's Life coordinators further west in **Chayek** (☎ 3536-22879; Moldaliev 4; contact Guljan Mykyeva) and **Kyzart** (contact Abdykazar Talgar); contact the Kochkor office for details.

LAKE SONG-KÖL ОЗЕРО СОН-КОЛ

Alpine lake Song-Köl (Son-Kul), at 3016m, is one of the loveliest spots in central Kyrgyzstan. All around it are lush pastures favoured by herders from the Kochkor Valley and beyond, who spend June to August here with their animals. Visitors are welcome, and this is a sublime place to camp and watch the sun come up. The cold, crystal-clear air, far away from light pollution and smog, guarantees a starry night sky so grand it is able to dwarf even this open landscape. You can make any number of day hikes into the surrounding hills for excellent views. The lake is jumping with fish, and you might be able to

trade tea, salt, sugar, cigarettes or vodka with the herders for milk, *kurut* (dried yogurt balls) or full-bodied *kymys*. In any case bring plenty of food and water.

Naryn and Kochkor CBT and Shepherd's Life projects offer more than a dozen **yurtstays** (per person full board 450som) around the lake, where you can also ride horses. There is no real need to arrange horses prior to arrival unless you are planning an extensive excursion as horses are easily rented directly from the locals. Bishkek-based travel companies such as NoviNomad (north shore) and ITMC Tien-Shan (south shore) operate tourist yurt camps in summer, where you can stay if there are no groups.

The lake and shore are part of the Song-Köl Zoological Reserve. Among animals under its protection are a diminishing number of wolves and lots of waterfowl, including the Indian mountain goose. The weather is unpredictable and snow can fall at any time so dress and plan accordingly. July to mid-September is the best season. Tourist organisations arrange **horse games** at the lake on the last Saturday in July and August (check with CBT in Kochkor). The lake is frozen from November to May.

It is possible to trek to Ak-Tal (see p322), a tiny village south of Song-Köl on the Naryn-Kazarman road.

Getting There & Away

It's 50km from the Bishkek-Naryn road to the lake: 6km to Keng-Suu (Tölök) village, 21km to the end of the narrow valley of the Tölök River, and then a slow 23km (1½ hours) up and over the Kalmak-Ashuu Pass into the basin. This upper road is normally open only from late May to late October. The valley has little traffic and no regular buses.

A car hired from Kochkor through CBT or Shepherd's Life is the easiest option to get here. Prices depend upon the price of petrol; rates are currently 9som to 10som per kilometre. Generally a car costs around 1800som to 2000som for the return trip. You may find something cheaper in the bazaar.

There are at least three other unpaved 4WD tracks to the lake: from west of the lake at Chayek, to the south from Jangy Talap (p322) just off the Naryn-Kazarman road, and a winter road from the southeast corner of the lake to the Bishkek-Naryn road. It's therefore possible to drive in from Kochkor and out to

Naryn or Chayek, making a nice, although expensive (as you will have to pay the return price of both cars) loop route. Hitching is possible but only if you have lots of time and your own supplies.

It's also possible to trek in to the lake on foot or horseback from Kyzart, near Jumgal, in one or two days, staying in shepherds' yurts in the Char Archa and Kilenche *jailoos* although check with Kochkor travel agencies to ensure the current location of yurts en route. This approach has the merit of avoiding the expensive transport to Song-Köl as the 11am minibus from Bishkek continues to Kyzart from Kochkor.

A second approach on horseback or foot lies to the east, from Chekildék, just west of Kochkor, over the Kara Katta range, into the Tölök Valley and then over the Ak-Tash Pass, taking around three days. The CBT and Shepherd's Life representatives in Kochkor or Shepherd's Life in Jumgal (opposite) can arrange accommodation, horses and a guide for around 1400som per day, plus food. Without a tent you really need a guide as it's impossible to find the yurtstays by yourself.

NARYN НАРЫН

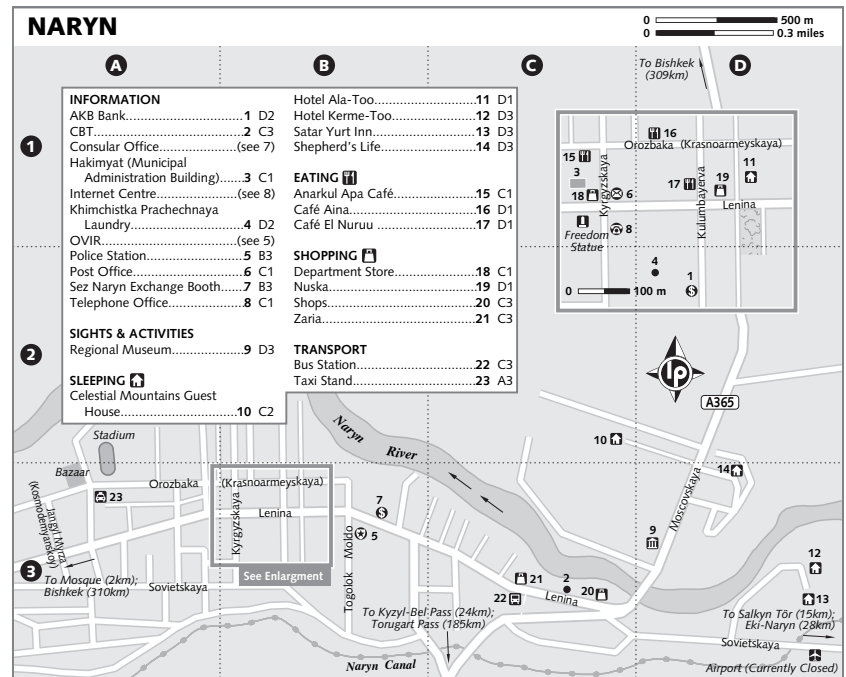
☎ 3522 / pop 38,000 / elev 2030m

Naryn makes a convenient base for visits to both Song-Köl and the Tash Rabat caravan-serai and from here it is possible to strike westward to Jalal-Abad via Kazarman. Naryn is derived from the Mongolian for 'sunny' – a rare moment of Mongol irony. The region's one real claim to fame is that the best quality *shyrdaks* are said to be made here.

Orientation

Dusty brown Naryn is strung along the milky-blue Naryn River for 15km. The town fails to fatten into anything decent, barely 2km at its widest point. The road from Bishkek forks north of the town, each branch of the fork leading to one end of town. A trolleybus (3som) and minibuses (5som) run along the main street, Lenina.

If there's a centre it's probably the *hakimiyat* (municipal administration) on Lenina although the most visible sign on this street is the English graffiti ('Melanie you are the best girl in the world') across the roof of the bus shelter 500m to the east. Other travellers'



landmarks are the small bazaar on Orozbaka, and the bus station, 800m east of the *hakimiyat* on Lenina.

Information

In an emergency it's possible to extend your visa at the Consular Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Special Economic Zone building, or at the **OVIR office** (Togolok Moldo 11).

The **Internet Centre** (Kyrgyzskaya; per hr 30som) on the south side of the **telephone office** (Kyrgyzskaya) has decent connections. The **post office** (Lenina) is across the road.

Naryn is the last place to change money before the Chinese border.

AKB Bank (1st fl, Kulumbayerva; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-5pm) Can change clean US dollars (and occasionally euros) as can CBT.

CBT (☎ 5 08 95, 5 08 65; naryn_tourism@rambler.ru; Lenina 8) Contact Kubat Abdylayev, a fount of information and can arrange regional yurtstays (250som), transport and horse treks. In addition to arranging trips to Song-Köl and Tash Rabat it has internet (per hour 30som), rents bicycles (150som per hour) and burns digital photos to CD (50som). A car to Kashgar via the Torugart Pass costs US\$300 and it takes one day to organise the Chinese permit.

Khimchistka Prachechnaya (Kulumbayerva) Does laundry for 15som per kilogram (takes two days).

Sez Naryn (Lenina) Exchange booth 500m east of the *hakimiyat*.

Sights & Activities

If you have time, check out the **regional museum** (Moscovskaya; admission 50som; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm). Most interesting is the ethnological room featuring a dissected yurt and every accessory a nomad could ever need. Soviet Kyrgyz legends such as Jukeev Tabaldy Pudovkin, a local Bolshevik hero, are also featured.

There's little else to see except the town's garish but striking **mosque**, 2.5km west of the centre – completed with Saudi money in 1993.

The CBT organises horse treks and has maps and photos of hikes in the hills south of Naryn. The treks range between two and seven hours, and offer views over Naryn, the At-Bashi range and local farmland. Herds of yak graze these parts so watch your step.

Sleeping

The CBT has 12 excellent places to stay in Naryn (B&B 250som to 350som per person, meals 120som), either in central apartment

blocks or suburban houses; many in the eastern Moscovskaya suburb. Try the CBT first to see what's available.

Hotel Ala-Too (☎ 2 18 72; Lenina; s/d 100/120som, tw/tr 300/450som, tw semi lux 800som) The standard rooms are pretty dilapidated but they are the cheapest in town and come with a stinky toilet. The renovated *lux* rooms are clean, spacious and surprisingly pleasant, with hot water and a balcony (for some rooms).

Shepherd's Life (☎ 4 14 57, 5 08 65; shepherds-life@rambler.ru; Kalykova 14; dm 200som) The coordinator Marima Amankulova's house and homestay (meals 100som) are one and the same in the eastern Moscovskaya suburb and one of the cheapest in town (because there is no shower). A 20som taxi or 5som minibus ride will save you the 15-minute walk from the bus station.

Satar Yurt Inn (☎ 5 03 22; Checkybaeva; yurtstay 200som, dm 300som) This is a collection of seven or eight tourist yurts, each of which contains five beds. Facilities include Western toilets, a shower that was under repair and a small restaurant (meals 60 to 100som). The twin and double rooms are modest but clean.

Hotel Kerme-Too (☎ 2 26 21; Checkybaeva; r/ste per person 250/330som) Recently privatised and largely deserted, this dimly lit hotel, 3km east of the centre, is good place to freak yourself out with its Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* air about it. There is a wide range of rooms, some no more than a glorified cupboard. Bathrooms are communal and not much. You can camp in the pleasant orchard next to the hotel for pennies. You can get there on bus 2.

Celestial Mountains Guest House (☎ /fax 5 04 12; www.celestial.com.kg; Moscovskaya 42; s/tw/tr without bathroom US\$30/36/42, ste US\$40, 3-bed yurt per person US\$13; ☎) Still the most luxurious place in town although it is starting to show some wear and tear around its edges. Run by the Bishkek travel agency (p282) of the same name, the guesthouse is also known as *Nebesnie Gori Naryna* or the 'English Guest House'. To escape the rigours of the road, unwind with free videos from its library. The suite, with en suite, offers the best value. Two meals are included in the price of the yurtstay.

Eating

Anarkul Apa Café (☎ 2 12 74; Orozbaka; mains 50-70som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Runs a close second to the El Nuruu (below).

Café El Nuruu (Kulumbayerva; mains 60som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Probably the best option in town of-

fering more than the usual standards. The *zharenie* chicken stir-fry is recommended (55som).

Café Aina (☎ 2 47 78; Orozbaka; mains 60-150som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Tries its hand at most things, from pizza to Chinese, touching on some European favourites (pancakes 15som) along the way. It has an English menu and unlike most others, stay open on Sunday.

The bazaar has a usual line-up of dairy products for self-caterers. You can also get good-quality canned goods, sausage and cheese in the private shops at the eastern crossroads.

Shopping

Zaria (Lenina) This NGO produces export-quality *shyrdaks* but keeps erratic hours so it is worth asking CBT to phone ahead. The entrance is difficult to spot; it's opposite the bus stop and displays a small paper sign in its window.

Nuska (Lenina) Again, difficult to find and often closed. This local designer produces high-quality *shyrdaks* that have been exhibited abroad. Look for the sandwich board on the street. The store is set back off the road behind the friendly ladies selling bread and vegetables from street stalls.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses depart between 8am and 10am from the bus station on Lenina for Bishkek (200som, six hours). Buses to Kazarman (180som, seven hours) depart at 8.30am on Tuesday and Friday. From June to August the daily bus to Jangy Talap leaves between 2pm and 3pm (80som, 2½ hours) and in winter at 1pm. Buses also go to At-Bashy (25som) to the south.

Shared taxis are a good alternative but the sharklike taxi drivers outside the bus station go into a feeding frenzy at the sight of a foreigner. Beware of the friendly guy who grabs your bag and takes you to a car that conveniently happens to be going your way and then charges you a finder's fee. A seat in a shared taxi costs 45som to At-Bashy, 100som to Jangy Talap, 200som to Kochkor and 300som to 350som to Bishkek. To hire your own taxi costs 1200som to 1300som to Bishkek, 2250som to Tash Rabat, 900som to Eki-Naryn.

AROUND NARYN Activities

CBT (opposite) can give the lowdown on a range of trips around Naryn, including yurtstays in the Ardaktuu Valley and Tyor Jailoo

in the Eki Naryn Valley. Given a few days' warning, it can organise the following multi-day horse treks. Most horse trips start from Echki-Bashy, 25km north of Naryn. Ask CBT about visits to the Tian Shan deer nursery at Irii-Suu (great for kids) and day trips up the Ak-Tam valley to see petroglyphs.

Echki-Bashy to Bokonbayevo (seven days by horse) Via Tuura-Suu.

Echki-Bashy to Song-Köl (four days by horse, five days by foot) Treks to the east side of the lake overnighting in tents and yurts. From Song-Köl it is possible to continue by car to Kochkor.

Jangy Talap to Song-Köl (two days by horse, three days by foot) Starting from Jangy Talap (Kurta) village, west of Naryn to Song-Köl's southern shore, overnighting in yurts (July and August) or tents.

Naryn State Reserve (2½ days by horse, 4½ days by foot) Transport by car to the state reserve then you follow the Big Naryn River to Karakalka village overnighting with the ranger or staying in tents. It is possible to arrange transport or trek independently to Barskoon from Kararalka.

Eki-Naryn Area

The scenic Kichi (Little) Naryn Valley stretches to the northeast of Naryn and offers plenty of opportunities for exploration. The main settlement is at Eki-Naryn, 30km northeast of Salkyn Tör, close to where the Kichi Naryn River meets the Naryn.

Around 10km north of Tash-Bashat is a fascinating swastika-shaped forest, said to have been planted by German prisoners of war under the noses of their Soviet captors.

Buses leave Naryn for Eki-Naryn at 8am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (40som), or you could take a taxi for around 700som. With your own transport it's possible to continue northeast and then swing west to follow the Kara-Kujur Valley back to Sary-Bulak and the main Naryn-Kochkor road.

If you don't wish to camp in the valley, check with CBT and Shepherd's Life in Naryn for service providers in the area. Community-Based Tourism arranges homestays at Lehol, and Shepherd's Life have a summer yurtstay at Ardakty Jailoo.

NARYN TO JALAL-ABAD

If you're planning to travel directly between the Fergana Valley and the Bishkek-Torugart road, it's possible to cut right across central Kyrgyzstan between Jalal-Abad and Naryn instead of going around via Bishkek. This route

goes via Kazarman (220km from Naryn), a rough-and-ready gold-mining town in the middle of nowhere. The mountain pass to the Fergana Valley is closed from November to late May or early June.

Naryn to Kazarman

From Naryn there are two ways to reach Kazarman and the one you'll end up taking largely depends on the transport you end up catching. The shorter route (five to six hours, excluding running repairs) favoured by shared taxis starts with a fairly monotonous drive along straight roads as far as Ak-Tal (or Ak-Talaa – White Fields), 75km west of Naryn. Things dramatically improve after the road turns right here, crosses the Naryn River and starts to wind through a higgledy-piggledy landscape of desert bluffs and badlands along a road blasted in 1903 by the Russian military. As you climb higher, the road gets dustier and all car windows are wound tightly shut; sit on the right to avoid dehydration in the baking sun. Statues of camels that look more like llamas on the left-hand side signal the top of the pass, after which there is another series of hair-pin bends and jaw-dropping views as the road winds down to Kazarman.

The second route, favoured by buses (eight hours), is the same as far as Ak-Tal but, instead of turning off towards Song-Köl, continues to Baetov, a forgotten rayon capital 40km southwest of Ak-Tal. The road eventually crosses the Ala-Buka River before climbing the 2932m Ak-Moinak Pass that leads to Kazarman.

At the Ak-Tal junction there is also a lonely 4WD track that leads up to the southern shore of Song-Köl (65km) via 33 switchbacks and the Moldo Ashuu Pass.

In **Ak-Tal** travellers report there is accommodation at **Konurchok Hotel** (☎ 03537-9 15 50; Zina Oshyrbayeva; r 100-150som; contact Busara Sagyndykova) or at Jangy Talap (also known as Kurtka), about 4km from Ak-Tal, with a **Shepherd's Life coordinator** (☎ 051-776 35 97; Yntymak 45; B&B 200som, sauna 20som; contact Svetla Jusupjanova) which can arrange accommodation and transport. There's one bus daily to Jangy Talap from Naryn at 4pm and there are irregular shared taxis (70som per seat). If you have time, try to track down the photogenic **Taylik Batyr Mausoleum**, near Kara-Oi village, around 8km from Jangy Talap.

Kazarman

☎ 3738 / pop 15,000 / elev 1230m

Kazarman is the kind of town that begs to be bypassed. Even the main road (Kadykulov) from Naryn to Jalal-Abad sweeps by on the southern outskirts of town. However it's not all bad; raw, untamed Kazarman's redemption lies in the nearby petroglyphs of Sailmaluu Tash.

The town exists to serve the open-cast Kakhmal gold mine about an hour to the east, and the nearby ore-processing plant, but not much of the wealth has trickled down into local hands.

Buses and taxis turn off the Naryn–Jalal-Abad through road and drop you five blocks north on the town's main drag, Jeenaliev (also called Mira). From west to east on Jeenaliev you'll find the Sailmaluu Tash park office, the Dom Kultura building, bus station, cafés and CBT office. One block north of the cafés is a tiny bazaar.

INFORMATION

CBT (☎ 4 17 36; Apt 3, Jeenaliev 20) If the office is locked, knock on the door of coordinator Janara Tuiteeva's house opposite the office behind light blue gates. There's not much in the way of service here, but staff should be able to sort out a B&B and guided tours to Sailmaluu Tash and the nearby Tuz and the Kargalyk mountains.

Sailmaluu Tash park office (☎ 4 16 76; Jeenaliev) About 200m west of CBT is the only other place in town that can help arrange a visit to the petroglyphs. It is both cheaper and staff more informed than the CBT.

SLEEPING & EATING

Now that the sole hotel in Kazarman has closed, homestays are the only accommodation option. There are also a half-dozen **CBT homestays** (B&B 300som, meals 90som), including the difficult to find homestay of English-speaking **Bakhtygul Chorobaeva** (☎ 2 19 16, 4 13 77; Kadykulova 35), five blocks south of the centre.

Ulan Tuiteev (Kadykulova 6) The local CBT guide provides a homestay and with help arrange treks to Sailmaluu Tash. As you arrive in town look for the small B&B sign on Kadykulova pointing down a side lane. Follow this for 75m to an even smaller lane on the right. Look for the large silver gate at the end of this lane. Knock loudly.

For privacy and a central location try the **CBT apartment** (Apt 6, Jeenaliev 20), behind the CBT office, which sleeps four in two rooms. There are two more homestays on Bekten (18 and 36), two blocks south of Jeenaliev.

We must have caught Kazarman on a bad day; of the three cafés along the main drag, two were open but had no food and the third, **Café Aimrza** (Jeenaliev), was only serving *laghman* (35som).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses depart Kazarman for Naryn (180som) on Wednesday and Saturday at around 8am (eight hours). At other times shared taxis and 4WDs congregate next to the bus parking lot on Jeenaliev, 50m west of CBT, and leave if and when they fill up. A seat in a shared taxi to Naryn costs 400som (5½ hours), Bishkek 800som, and 400som per seat in 4WDs bound for Jalal-Abad (four to six hours). Occasional minibuses also depart from here to Bishkek (600som).

Because of the very real possibility that there will be no-one to share your shared taxi, budget for the worst-case scenario – having to fork out for all four seats.

Sailmaluu Tash

The several thousand 'embroidered stones' of Sailmaluu Tash are Central Asia's most dramatic petroglyphs. Over the millennia Aryan, Scythian and Turkic peoples have added to the earliest Bronze Age carvings. The carvings are spread over two slopes and depict hunting, shamanistic rites and battle scenes, some dating back more than 4000 years.

The petroglyphs are difficult to reach and are for the committed and adventurous. From Kazarman there are two route options, via Atai, 20km west along the road to Jalal-Abad, and the second via Chet Bulak south of Kazarman (so you can take one up and another one back). Both trips involve a car trip of about 45 minutes, followed by a half-day hike or horse trip. The petroglyph gallery is only accessible from June to mid-September. It's best to spend the night at yurts near the site and explore the stones for a few hours early the next morning, although a rushed day trip is also possible.

CBT can arrange an overnight horse trip for around 7500som for two people. This includes 4WD hire, guide (for two days), horses for two people and admission tickets (450som per person, per day). Food is extra, as is accommodation in yurts if available. Otherwise bring your own tent.

You can get a better deal at the park office (*monpekettik zharalypish parky*) on Ka-

zarman's main street. Staff can organise guides and accommodation in a yurt (1000som) for as many as you can squeeze in.

It is also possible to approach Sailmaluu Tash on a longer route from the Fergana Valley, from Kalmak-Kyrchyn up the Kök Art Valley. The CBT in Jalal-Abad (p332) can arrange transport and horses from the western approach, from where you can descend to Kazarman.

Kazarman to Jalal-Abad

There are no scheduled buses to Jalal-Abad, only when and if they fill up will Nivas and Russian 4WDs depart (400som per person).

The road begins benignly enough, but the asphalt soon splutters out leaving a degraded dirt road, long overdue for some serious attention. Parts have been gouged away by rain-water run-off and the views down into the ravines from the crumbling track will have you reaching for your nonexistent seat belt. The road finally crests a 3100m summit at a spot commemorated by a statue of an eagle and a row of ugly pylons. From the scenery on the Fergana side you can see why the area is referred to as Central Asia's breadbasket. All going well the trip finishes sometime between four and six hours later at Jalal-Abad bazaar. The previous author's Niva broke down 27 times along this route.

NARYN TO TORUGART At-Bashy

At-Bashy is off the Naryn–Torugart road, 6km by an easterly access road, 4km by a westerly one, and truly the far end of populated Kyrgyzstan. Sandwiched between the At-Bashy and Naryn Tau ranges, the town has a great location and can be used as a springboard for visits to Tash Rabat, Koshoi Korgon and the Torugart Pass. Through the Shepherd's Life programme you could also arrange visits to the surrounding villages of Tus Bogoshtu (6km), Kök Köl (40km), or further afield to Bosogo Jailoo – a forested region ideal for trekking and, during September, blackcurrant picking.

ORIENTATION

From the bus station at the east end of town head 1.5km west past the new mosque to the cinema and city administration building. Turn right at this building and head north on Atty Suleimanov towards the low hill that marks the canal 1km in the distance. Continue

HEADING TOWARDS THE TORUGART PASS

It's about 130km from Naryn to the outer border checkpoint and a further 60km to the main customs station at Torugart, a total of about 4½ hours' driving if you make no stops.

From Naryn it's 24km to the low **Kyzyl-Bel Pass**, with a stupendous view right down the crest of the At-Bashy range (highest point 4786m). The road runs along the foot of this range and around the far (west) end of it to Torugart. About 13km and 20km from the pass are two turn-offs to the village of **At-Bashy**, the closest point to the border accessible by regular bus, and an hour's drive from Naryn.

West of At-Bashy is a yawning, red-walled notch on the north side of the valley; the road crosses a stream that drains everything through this notch and down to the Naryn River. Low bluffs west of the stream partly conceal a bizarre landscape of perfectly rounded, sandy hills. By the roadside is a splendid Kyrgyz graveyard.

About 14km west of the second At-Bashy access road is a turn-off to Kara-Suu village and the ruins of **Koshoy Korgon**.

Some 40km west of At-Bashy the road turns to gravel, but for a startling 3km before it does so, it becomes as wide and smooth as a four-lane superhighway; a military airstrip, apparently never used. About 21km from the end of the airstrip is the turn-off south to **Tash Rabat**.

Approximately 28km west of this turn-off is the low **Ak-Beyit Pass** at the end of the At-Bashy range. Then it's 4km to the **outer checkpoint**, an hour's drive from At-Bashy, and another fine view – to the crest line, on the border itself.

South from the outer checkpoint the road rapidly degenerates as views of the Fergana range rise to the west. Some 26km on, at the 3574m **Tüz-Bel Pass**, it swings east and skirts **Chatyr-Köl**. Black cranes and Indian mountain geese pause at the lake during their transcontinental migrations – one reason why the lake and its marshy shoreline are protected as the Chatyr-Köl Zoological Reserve. An old Soviet-era double electrified fence (no longer live) runs near the road. As the road climbs, the surrounding mountains seem to just melt away.

Fifty kilometres from the outer checkpoint and 7km from the Kyrgyzstan customs and immigration station, a big red-and-yellow sign says 'Narzan'; 50m off the road in a field of bubbling mud is a gushing cold spring, fizzy and tasty.

four blocks and turn left down a dirt road, Arpa, for 250m to get to Tursan's homestay. A taxi will cost 30som.

SLEEPING & EATING

Homestay of Tursan Akieva (☎ 3534-219 44; Arpa 25; dm 200som) Tursan is the local coordinator of Shepherd's Life and offers a family atmosphere (breakfast included, meals 90som) in a home resplendent with *shyrdaks* and carpets. Tursan also arranges transport to Tash Rabat and Torugart, dispenses info on local *shyrdak* cooperatives and puts travellers in touch with several yurtstays in surrounding mountains.

There are a couple of grotty cafés at the bus station and on Lenin, plus a small bazaar about 600m west of the bus station.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are scheduled daily buses in the morning to Naryn (25som, 1½ hours), a 6.30pm night bus to Bishkek (189som, eight hours) and Kara-Suu (25som, 30 minutes). A seat

in a shared taxi to Bishkek costs 450som, or 50som to 60som to Naryn.

Taxis ask 1200som (negotiate waiting time) return to Tash Rabat, though you could get one cheaper through Tursan at the Shepherd's Life programme. Taxis also scout for passengers at the bazaar on Lenin.

Koshoy Korgon

In a field behind the village of Kara-Suu are the eroded ruins of a large citadel, occupied during the 10th to 12th (or early 13th centuries), and probably Karakhanid. An appealing local legend tells that the Kyrgyz hero Manas built the citadel and a mausoleum here for his fallen friend Koshoy.

A private taxi (four seats) from At-Bashy to the site costs about 400som for a return visit. About 14.5km west of the western access road to At-Bashy, by a petrol station on the Naryn–Torugart road, turn south (signposted) to Kara-Suu village. Take the first left turn in the village after the mosque and silver

war memorial, continue past all the houses and then take a right and then another right to the ruins, 3km from the main road.

Next to the ruins, Shepherd's Life has a **homestay** (200som), which could be a good base for hikes in the At-Bashy range.

Tash Rabat

About 60km from At-Bashy a dirt track heads into a hidden, surprisingly level valley, surrounded by lush corduroy hillsides that has been offering shelter to well-to-do travellers for centuries in a fortified **caravanserai** (adult/child 50/25som; ☒ 9am–5pm mid-May–mid-Oct) that looks like a mausoleum, sunk into the hillside.

Local sources say it dates from the 15th century, although some sources say the site dates from the 10th century, when it was a Christian monastery. Either way historians agree that at one time Tash Rabat (Kyrgyz for stone fortress) must have had significant Silk Road political and trade importance to justify the investment of the labour required for its construction.

It's irregular shape and improbable location has fuelled a number of local legends. One relates how a ruling khan devised a test for his two sons to see whom was worthy to inherit his throne. One son determined to prove that he could provide for his people pursued the development of education, agriculture and industry. The other son amassed armies and built fortresses. Tash Rabat stands as a silent reminder of a war-mongering man who lost a khanate to his philanthropic brother.

A clumsy Soviet restoration was completed in 1984. A few fragments of the original central mosque are visible in the main chamber; leading off this are many other chambers, including a well (some say a treasury, in the far left corner) and a dungeon (in the central right chamber). An opening in the far right corner leads to what the caretakers say is a tunnel, explored generations ago for as far as about 200m, and perhaps once leading to a lookout point to the south.

Community-Based Tourism Naryn (p320) sells a photocopied pamphlet, *A Self-Guided Tour of Tash Rabat*, which helps fill in some of the gaps.

From Tash Rabat a six-hour horse ride or hike will take you to a broad ridge overlooking **Chatyr-Köl**; if you continue for a couple of hours, you can stay the night in a yurt at Chatyr-Köl before returning to Tash Rabat

the next day. Remember that you are about 3500m high here, so even a short walk could set your head pounding. Neither Tash Rabat nor Chatyr-Köl are in a restricted border zone. The caretakers at Tash Rabat can arrange the trip and rent horses for 70som per hour or 420som per day and a trekking guide for 420som per day or a mounted guide for 620som per day, making this a great place to spend a day or two exploring.

You can stay at the **yurts** (250som) of Shepherd's Life (meals 90som) or the caretaker's yurts across from the caravanserai. There are two more yurtstays located 1km back downstream.

There's no public transport here and because of snow the road is closed between mid-October to mid-May. A day trip by taxi from Naryn to Tash Rabat (two hours) costs around 2250som; otherwise drivers charge an additional 550som per day for food and lodging. For a further 70som you can visit Koshoy Korgon (opposite) on the same day. Alternatively, it is also possible (and recommended) to include Tash Rabat as a side trip en route to the Torugart Pass although this involves setting out an hour and a half earlier and an additional US\$10 to cover the extra kilometres.

TORUGART PASS ПЕРЕБАЛ ТОРУГАРТ

Torugart is one of Asia's most unpredictable border posts. Even the most painstaking arrangements can be thwarted by logistical gridlock on the Chinese side or by unpredictable border closures (eg for holidays, snow or heaven knows what else).

Most of the traffic through the pass is trucks carrying scrap metal and animal hides from Kyrgyzstan, or porcelain, thermoses, beer and clothing from China. The trucks accumulate in huge tailbacks at both sides, for 500m or more in the mornings.

From the Kyrgyzstan customs and immigration station it is 6.8km to the summit. Below this, about 5km away, is a checkpoint, though the main Chinese customs and immigration post is another 70km away.

The Torugart Pass is normally snow-free from late May through to September. The crossing is theoretically kept open all year, but is icy and dangerous in winter. The **customs & immigration facilities** are open from 10am to 5pm Monday to Friday, but in reality you must cross between 9am and noon. Besides

the various customs sheds, inspection pits and immigration offices, there is a spartan state 'hotel', though most people who stay do so in basic caravans 1km before the customs area.

Red Tape

Essentially many of the difficulties crossing the pass boil down to Torugart being classified by the Chinese as a 'Class 2' border crossing, for local traffic only, and so special regulations are in force for foreigners, many of which seem deliberately set up to milk foreigners of some hard currency. For example, foreigners aren't allowed to take the weekly bus that runs between Kashgar and Kyrgyzstan. The bottom line is that you must have onward Chinese transport arranged and waiting for you on the Chinese side to be allowed past the Kyrgyz border post.

Kyrgyz border officials are insistent on written confirmation of this onward transport into China, and detain visitors until their transport arrives at the summit from Kashgar. The best thing to have is a fax from an accredited Chinese tour agency, who will come and meet you. No special endorsement is required on your Chinese visa.

The three-point border – two border controls 12km apart and a security station in between makes for further confusion. You are not allowed to walk or cycle on the Chinese side of the border in no-man's-land. It is therefore *essential* that your Kyrgyz transport continues past the custom post to the actual border to meet your prearranged Chinese onward transport. Only drivers with a Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry special permit can go this far. Normally the Chinese guards at the arch radio to Kyrgyz immigration when your transport arrives and only then are you allowed to leave the Kyrgyz border post. See right for further advice and p349 for general advice.

Travel Agencies

Arranging the whole trip from Bishkek to Kashgar currently costs from around US\$100 to US\$200 per person in a group of four, depending on the agent and the vehicle.

Of Bishkek's travel agencies (p282), Novi-Nomad was the cheapest we found, charging US\$285 for a car from Bishkek to Kashgar seating three (excluding driver's food and accommodation). Celestial Mountains, Kyrgyz Concept and ITMC Tien Shan (p284) were also competitively priced and worth checking.

Community-Based Tourism Naryn (p320) also arranges reliable transport to Kashgar from Naryn for US\$300 per vehicle (US\$120 for Kyrgyz transport, US\$180 for Chinese transport) in a car capable of seating four. Allow one full day to organise.

Most agents can make arrangements with a cooperating Chinese agency for onward transport. The charge for this is set by the Chinese agency and normally paid in US dollars to the Chinese driver once in China. If this is the case, get a printed confirmation of the price from your Kyrgyz agent to avoid any dispute later. You could deal directly with a Chinese travel agency from abroad but it's generally easier to let the agency make the arrangements.

If you do wish to contact Chinese agencies, you could try **John's Information Café** (☎ 86-998-255 1186; johncafe@hotmail.com) or **Caravan Café** (☎ 86-998-298 1864; www.caravancafe.com, www.asianexplorations.com; 120 Seman Lu) in Kashgar, though neither are that easy to contact in advance and we have received complaints about both.

Cycling

It is possible to cycle the Torugart – but not the whole way. From Naryn it is a 2½-day ride to Tash Rabat and from there it is possible to ride past the Kyrgyz customs as far as the borderline from where you will also need prearranged Chinese transport (two cyclists per car).

Community-Based Tourism Naryn (p320) can arrange the Chinese transport (US\$180 per car) and provide a covering letter (US\$50) that states a Chinese representative is waiting on the Chinese side for you and your bike. The covering letter will also explain that you have been informed not to leave the main road past the Korgon Tash checkpoint, and will only camp by the roadside.

Crossing the Pass KYRGYZSTAN

When both sides of the border finally open, you and your driver show confirmation of onward transport and then, cold and frustrated, wait until the radio call comes from the Chinese side that your onward transport has arrived. After this you march into customs, bags in tow, where officials collect the customs form you filled out when you entered the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and try (and probably succeed) to sell you a customs form for 30som. You then

proceed through immigration. Meanwhile, your vehicle is being strip-searched in a garage next door.

After inspection you jump back into your vehicle and continue 7km to the border. If you don't have transport for this section, this is where your headache begins, as you'll have to negotiate with a driver to give you a lift and with the officials to let you pass.

SUMMIT

In the border zone, roughly halfway between the two customs and immigration stations, permitted vehicles are allowed, but apparently no pedestrians. At the summit, your new driver and some Chinese soldiers will be waiting for the transfer. Big handshakes all around. Don't forget to take a look at the beautiful pass, which you just fought so hard to cross.

CHINA

Another 5km later you will arrive at the original Chinese border post, where the Bishkek–Kashgar bus passengers will be patiently unrolling every carpet and draining every thermos for the customs patrol. Just to keep up appearances, the guards will have you line up all your baggage and then choose one at random to dig through.

It's surprising how the climate and landscape change when you cross the pass. The Chinese side is abruptly drier, more desolate and treeless, with little physical development other than adobe Kyrgyz settlements. The road runs through Kyzylsu Kyrgyz Autonomous County.

The 100km of road closest to the border is a miserable washboard surface, spine-shattering to travel along and choked with dust. At the junction of the Torugart and Irkeshtam roads is the spanking new Chinese customs and immigration station.

Chinese immigration is open 1pm to 5pm Beijing time but officers will wait for you if you are late. Here you fill out entry forms and get your passport stamped, both relatively painless. The post has a Bank of China branch, a couple of simple noodle shops and a small guesthouse, though travellers in either direction are discouraged from staying. From here to Kashgar it's 60km of paved road.

The whole Torugart–Kashgar trip is 160km, a 3½- to four-hour 4WD trip.

BISHKEK TO OSH & THE KYRGYZ FERGANA VALLEY

From the standpoint of landscape, the Bishkek–Osh road is a sequence of superlatives, taking the traveller over two 3000m-plus passes, through the yawning Suusamyр Valley, around the immense Toktogul reservoir, down the deep Naryn River gorge and into the broad Fergana Valley.

The road has improved dramatically recently as the government tries to solder the two halves of the country together using better transport and communication links. The Bishkek to Toktogul stretch is still blocked occasionally by rock falls and avalanches. Snow fills the passes from late October until March; the road is kept open but is dangerous. Scheduled transport thins out by October, although cars continue to push through.

BISHKEK TO TASHKÖMÜR Bishkek to Suusamyр Valley

Even before you climb out of the Chuy Valley from Kara-Balta, the craggy Kyrgyz Alatau range rises like a wall. The road climbs through a crumbling canyon towards the highest point of the journey, the 3586m **Tör-Ashuu Pass** at the suture between the Talas Alatau and Kyrgyz Alatau ranges. Instead of climbing over, the road burrows through, in a series of dripping tunnels (built by the same team that constructed the metros in Leningrad and Moscow) that open to a grand, eagle's-eye view of the Suusamyр Basin.

There is a 45som toll collected (or checked) at each end of the Tör-Ashuu Pass.

In 2001 the longest tunnel (2.6km) was the scene of a freak accident when a car broke down midway through causing a traffic-jam. By the time the truck drivers turned off their engines four people had died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

About 4½ hours out of Bishkek a road shoots off, straight as an arrow, across the basin towards Suusamyр, Chayek and eventually the Bishkek–Naryn road (p315). This is classic Kyrgyz yurt country, with plenty of summer roadside stands, offering fresh *kymys* (1L 30som) and other dairy products.

After another 1½ hours another road branches right, over the 3330m Otmek Pass 106km towards Talas, and Taraz in Kazakhstan.

Suusamyр Valley

This rarely visited valley combines a backdoor route to the Kochkor area (see p317) with classic central Kyrgyzstan mountain landscapes. No buses go all the way to Kochkor so you'd have to hitch from Kyzyl-Oi as far as Chayek, probably with one of the many coal trucks headed to a mine near Song-Köl. Adventurous trekkers can visit the valley as part of a trek to/from Bishkek over the Kyrgyz Alatau via the Sokuluk (3775m), Ala-Archa (3898m) or Alamedin (4032m) passes.

In **Suusamyр** town it's possible to arrange homestay accommodation with Kubanychbek Amankulov (look for the tourist info sign on the main road). He can also arrange transport and yurtstays in *jailoos* east at Joo Jurok (30km from Suusamyр; contact Negizbek Imankulov), 20km north at Boirok (contact Eshbolot Cheinekeev) and 13km southeast at Sandyk (contact Kubat Amankulov). Little English is spoken at any of these.

Kyzyl-Oi (ask for Artyk Kulubaev at the shop 'Aksar') has a fledgling homestay programme, which also offers horse and foot treks to the Köl Tör lakes (five hours on horse; up the Char Valley, staying at the yurt of Bayish Toltoev, and then over the Kumbel Pass) and also to *jailoos* in the Sary Kamysh range to the south of town. Artyk can arrange horse hire, guides and food. Homestays include those of Tungatar Konushbaev, Katya Kulumursaeva, and Kanat Soltonkulov, the latter with a *banya* and *shyrdaks* for sale. The programme hasn't had many tourists and is less polished than CBT.

Dostuck Trekking (p284) operates a yurt camp in the Suusamyр Valley; book a spot in advance.

Transport from Kyzyl-Oi runs almost daily to Suusamyр, from where there are daily buses to Bishkek's Osh Bazaar.

From Kyzyl-Oi it's 40km or so to Shepherd's Life coordinators at Chayek (p318) and Jangy Talap (p322), from where you can arrange horse trips to Song-Köl (p318).

Talas

☎ 3422

The town of Talas itself has little of interest except the **Manas Ordu**, claimed to be the

14th-century tomb of Manas (actually the tomb of Kenizek Khatum, the daughter of a regional governor, buried in 1334), east of town in the village of Tash Aryk. The Talas Valley was the scene of a pivotal battle between Arab and Chinese armies in the 8th century. Today, there are a couple of cafés, a medical clinic and some fledgling sustainable-tourism projects.

CBT Talas (☎ 5 29 19; cbt_talas@list.ru; Kayimov Yuzhnaya 76) offers accommodation (250 to 420som) around town and at Ozgorush, 50km north-east of town, and a yurtstay in Besh-Tash (Five Stones) National Park. It can also arrange guides and horses. The park is 15km from town and the first yurt is 38km from town. Contact Turdubek Aiyilchiev.

Minibuses run over the Otmek Pass between Talas and Bishkek's Osh Bazaar at least once a day. The road through the Talas Valley goes as far as Taraz in Kazakhstan and makes an interesting alternative route to Kazakhstan.

Suusamyр Valley to Tashkömür

A further 30 minutes' drive after the turn-off to Talas the road climbs again, up to the 3184m summit of the **Ala-Bel Pass** over the Suusamyр-Tau mountains. Lower, broader and longer than the Tör-Ashuu Pass, it is nevertheless colder, and said to be the bigger wintertime spoiler. The beautiful valley down the south side of the pass is part of the **Chyckan state zoological reserve** (*chyckan* means mouse).

The flash **Ak Ilbirs Hotel** (s/d 850/1650som, lux s/d 1600/3200som), by the roadside, is recognisable by a line of flags and its suitably alpine architecture. The standard rooms have more reliable hot water than the *lux*. Meals are 40som to 100som.

The town of **Toktogul** (population 70,000) and the reservoir it sits next to are named after a well-known Kyrgyz *akyn*, Toktogul Satilganov (1884–1933), who was born here. It takes over an hour to detour around the vast Toktogul Reservoir. Some tour groups camp on the far side of the reservoir. Several roadside stalls on the south side of the lake serve delicious fried *farel* (trout).

The town of **Kara-Köl** (population 22,000) is of note only for its dam, part of the Nizhnenarynskiy Kaskad, a series of five dams down the lower gorge of the Naryn River. This *kaskad* (dam), topmost in the series, was completed in 1976 after 14 years' work and is a pretty awesome feat of Soviet engineering:

210m high, 150m wide at the top, and holding back a 19-billion-cubic-metre lake. Just about everybody in town works for the hydroelectric station Toktogul'skiy Gidroelektrostantsiya (GES). Kara-Köl is not to be confused with the much pleasanter town of Karakol on Lake Issyk-Köl. The dam isn't visible from the road and a visit needs special permission.

South of Kara-Köl the gorge of the **lower Naryn River** is an impressive passage, with sheer walls and towering pillars of red sandstone, and a little road clinging to the side – but keep your gaze upwards. Looking down you will see that there is no longer any river at all, just a depressing series of narrow, utterly still lakes behind the dams of the Nizhnenarynskiy Kaskad. At lower elevations the gorge bristles with pylons. Sit on the 'west' side of the bus for the best views of the ruin.

Tashkömür

☎ 3745

About 5½ hours, drive from Toktogul is the coal-mining town of Tashkömür, strung for miles along the west side of the river below one of the dams. The deserted slag heaps outside the town are silent testament to the collapse of Kyrgyzstan's coal industry since independence. The town itself is one of the lowlights of Kyrgyzstan, but it is one of the main starting points to beautiful Lake Sary-Chelek, 70km west.

The town **gostinitsa** (hotel; r per person 70som) next to the bus station has ratty rooms without bathrooms. A better bet is to follow the train tracks 500m from the bus station to a blue-tiled **gostinitsa** (☎ 2 06 33; Lenina, r per person 200som), which is better than the smashed windows and deserted foyer might suggest.

There are a few cheap cafés serving luke-warm *laghman* at lunchtime near the bus station, along with what may well be Central Asia's most pitiful bazaar.

From the bus station in the centre of town a minibus leaves at 5.30am for Osh (170som); 6.20am, 7.20am and 12.20pm for Jalal-Abad (90som); 9am for Bishkek (350som); 9.45am for Kerben (49som); and at 10am and 1.30pm for Kara Jigach (55som). To get a shared taxi, head 3km from town to the Naryn River bridge, where there is a collection of kiosks and food stalls and a telephone office. A seat in a shared taxi costs 250som to Osh, 150som to Jalal-Abad and 650som to Bishkek.

LAKE SARY-CHELEK ОЗЕРО САРЫ-ЧЕЛЕК

☎ 3742 / elev 1878m

This beautiful 7km-long alpine lake, nature reserve and biosphere lies hidden in the northern flanks of the Fergana Valley amid groves of wild pistachios, walnuts and fruit trees. The lake is thought to have been created by an earthquake that caused a giant landslide about 800 years ago and reaches a depth of 234m.

There is a park entry fee of US\$10 (50som for locals), plus 60som per car. The park is part of Unesco's Western Tian Shan Biodiversity project and lynx, bears and maral deer live in the surroundings. Sadly, there is little sign of even the most basic level of environmental protection.

The base for visits to the lake is the small village of Arkit, actually inside the park, where you'll find the **park office** (zapovednik; ☎ 2 22 84), a nearby **nature museum** (zapovednik; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) and a couple of homestays. The lake is 15km from here, accessible by car. An lookout has just been built halfway along the road.

CBT (☎ 3125 5 93 31; reservation@cbtkyrgyzstan.kg) has a coordinator (Bazarkul Zhooshbaev) in Kyzyl-Kul village in the Kara-Suu Valley, who can arrange accommodation in homes or yurts (250 to 300som), plus arrange horses and guides for treks up the valley to Kara-Suu Lake and beyond over the Kemerty Pass to Lake Sary-Chelek. Four sleeping bags and three tents are available to rent.

Trekking

Once you get to the lake there's not much else to do except go for a walk. A good three- to four-hour loop hike offers views of four other lakes. Follow the faint path east uphill behind the lakeshore caretaker's house for fine views of Sary-Chelek. The path then drops down into a meadow and follows the base of the ridge to swing around to Yri Köl lake, which makes a good lunch stop. At the far end of the small lake take a right turn to a smaller reedy lake, then climb and take another right. After you drop down to the fourth lake it's easier to follow the left branch and join the road. The right path is scenic but involves a tricky river crossing at the far end.

It's possible to make a six-day trek in to Sary-Chelek from Leninopol (catch a daily bus from Talas). An easier trek starts from Kyzyl-Kul in the next-door valley. From here

it's a long day's walk up the valley to Kara-Suu Lake, where you can stay in a CBT-arranged yurt. The next day is a hard slog over the 2446m Kemerty Pass and then down to Sary-Chelek, either directly or via Iyri Köl lake.

Both routes are marked on the 1:120,000 *Cherez Talasskii Khrebet k Ozeru Sary-Chelek*, available at Geoid in Bishkek (p279).

Sleeping & Eating

Arkit's homestays are generally more basic than those of CBT or Shepherd's Life and all include breakfast.

Attakur Omurbekov's Guesthouse (☎ 9 21 41; dm 100som) Another 250m up the main road from the Saberia (below) on the opposite of the street is another friendly option. All the household action takes place around the kitchen (meals 50som) in a garden shed. Omurbekov will take you up to Sary-Chelek in his car for 400som.

Saberia Guesthouse (dm 150som) About 1km from the first gates, and recognisable by its sign, the Saberia is run by the town's eccentric but charming English teacher and her husband, a vodka-drinking ornithologist. Guests wash in the river although water can be heated. The hosts can also help arrange horses for trekking.

Sultan Chukotaev (☎ 9 21 36; dm 200som) Arguably the most professional homestay in town with a detached house converted into three guest rooms, one with Western-style beds.

There is also a government hotel with fairly decent rooms and Café Millenium (which doubles as the post office and bus stop) can rustle up food given some warning.

At the lake itself it is possible to camp but you need to get written permission (no fee) from the park office in Arkit. Otherwise try **Toskool-Ata Kumbozu** (cabin per person US\$15) where each cabin has an en suite toilet (no shower) or stay in its nearby yurtstay. Meals are extra.

Getting There & Away

The lake's remote location makes it a real pain to reach by public transport; consider hiring a taxi here if nowhere else in the country.

By public transport you need to catch the 10am or, better, the 1.30pm bus from Tashkömür to Kara Jigach (55som, three hours) and then hitch or wait for the afternoon buses from Kerben (Karavan) to pass through en route to Arkit (20som) between 6pm and 7pm. The route to Kara Jigach passes

neglected coal mines and weird eroded *hoodoos* (rock columns). The decrepit local snub-nosed buses are packed, hot, uncomfortable and mind-numbingly slow. From Arkit you'll need to hire a car (400som return) or hike (four hours, but little traffic) to the lake.

Heading back, there is a bus from Arkit to Kara Jigach at 7.30am (the bus continues on to Kerben), from where you can catch a bus to Tashkömür at 9.30am or 3pm.

If you are headed for the CBT coordinator, the 4.20pm bus from Kerben to Kyzyl-Suu also passes through Kara Jigach between 6pm and 7pm, returning the next day at 7am.

A taxi from Tashkömür will cost around 2000som to Arkit or 500som per seat if you are lucky enough to find a shared one. A taxi from Osh costs US\$150 but you will need to leave by 6am to pass the first gate by 2pm when it closes.

ARSLANBOB APCJAHBOB

☎ 3722 / elev 1600m

Arslanbob is an elevated oasis, a vast tract of blossoming woodland and home to the largest walnut grove on earth (11,000 hectares) and part of the even larger (60,000 hectare) walnut forest that extends between the spurs of the Fergana and Chatkal ranges.

Buses often drop passengers 200m uphill from the bus station at the main square by a stone lion, a taxi stand and the CBT office. From here the road continues uphill, branching left to the *turbaza* (former Soviet holiday camp) and right to the upper waterfall. Behind the town are the wall-like Babash-Ata Mountains and a raft of trekking opportunities.

On the other side of the square is a rickety wooden bridge spanning a rocky stream. Over the bridge are the town's cafés, a (summer only) bazaar and the local mosque. This is a fairly conservative village; so don't walk around in shorts and singlets.

From mid-September the town undergoes a mass exodus when locals move into the forest and go nuts. Each year 1500 tonnes of walnuts (and 5000 tonnes of apples, pistachios and cherry plums) are harvested in the Arslanbob valley and by all accounts gathering nuts is fun. Tradition dictates that during the harvest each family kill a sheep and share the meat with their neighbours. The fire-lit autumn nights are a time to sing songs, retell stories and eat way too much greasy mutton.

History

The nuts of Arslanbob are somewhat of a misnomer. While native to Central Asia they originated in Malaysia and somehow, many thousands of years ago, spread to this isolated valley. Locals will tell you this was the work of a modest gardener, charged by the Prophet Mohammed with finding paradise on earth. He travelled through many lands until he stumbled upon a picturesque valley, framed by mountains, watered by mountain rivers but lacking in trees. Delighted with this discovery, the Prophet sent him a bag of fruit and nut seeds which the hero scattered from a mountaintop.

By the time Alexander the Great led his troops to these parts the forests were already locally famous as hunting grounds. On his return to Greece he took with him the humble Kyrgyz walnut from which European plantations were founded; hence the walnut is commonly, but mistakenly, referred to as the 'Greek nut'.

Information

CBT (☎ 5 47 98, 0503-34 24 76; arslanbob_2003@rambler.ru) Has an excellent branch, which can help with everything from homestays and transport to horse treks. Contact Hayat Tarikov.

Sights & Activities

There are several day-hike options, though the most popular is the three-hour return hike to a holy 80m-high **waterfall**. The last half hour is an uphill grind over a slippery scree slope – wear good shoes as the return leg is like walking down a slope of marbles. Horses are available but aren't all that useful as you still have to slog up the last hill yourself. The fence in front of the falls is covered in votive rags, harking back to a pre-Islamic animism. An easier walk leads about 45 minutes to a smaller **twin waterfall** (23m) to the east, from where you can continue to a **walnut forest** and the **shrine of Ibn Abbas**. It is also possible to walk to the **Dashman walnut forest** via Gumhana village and Jaradar in a long day.

Back at the village square, check out the riverside **mazar** (tomb) of Arslan Bab-Ata, after whom the town and mountains are named.

TREKKING

Community-Based Tourism can arrange a couple of trekking options to the holy lakes of Köl Kupan (marked Kulan on maps), Paino

Köl, Kabyr Köl and Ainek Köl (Mirror Lake), collectively referred to as the Köl Mazar. This makes for a fine three- or four-day trek or horse trek, stopping at a cube-shaped holy rock en route. Community-Based Tourism has a couple of ratty tents for rent but it's best to bring your own equipment.

Instead of retracing your steps you can continue over the Kerets Pass and east along the Kerets Valley, with the Nurbuu-Tau Mountains to the north, until you swing south down the Kara-Unkor Valley. You can then continue down to Kyzyl Ünür or head back to Arslanbob via the Kara-Bulak Valley for an excellent five- or six-day trek.

A CBT-organised trek with a guide, cook and three meals costs around US\$18 per person per day on foot or US\$27 per day on horseback, assuming there are two people. A horse costs 400som per day; donkeys are cheaper.

The adjacent **Kyzyl Ünür** (Red Cavern) Valley has a network of hiking and fishing routes equal to, if not grander than, those around Arslanbob. Community-Based Tourism plans to set up some homestays here but until then you'll need a tent and supplies (the *turbaza* is currently closed). Travellers recommend the trek north from Kyzyl Ünür, up the Kara Ünür Valley to tiny Kön-Köl (you can do this section by car) and then northeast over the Kymysh Bel Pass (3754m) to the fish-stocked Kara-Suu and Kalka-Tash Lakes. From here you can head down the Kara-Suu Valley to join the main Bishkek-Osh road at Kök Bel, between Kara-Köl and Toktogul, or return on a loop back to Kyzyl Ünür via Kön-Köl Pass, either way making an intrepid six-day trek.

SKIING

Community-Based Tourism is developing the mountain *jailoos* surrounding Arslanbob for cross-country skiing. The idea has a lot of merit but is still in its infancy with only five pairs of old skis and boots available for hire. Proposed transport to the *jailoos* would be via 4WD and on foot with the aid of snowshoes.

Sleeping & Eating

Turbaza Arslanbob (☎ 5 28 40; s50som, pol-lux 100som, lux/superlux 200/300som) Run-down but rustic, this scruffy former Soviet holiday camp has dozens of bungalows scattered around 29 hectares of grounds. Only the best rooms have hot water and en suite toilets but even these are quite basic. There's an open-air swimming pool

popular with locals as is the disco that keeps most people awake half the night.

Zinaida Mamajanova (Aral 13; dm 250som) From the main square, walk 30m west and turn left onto a small dirt track that follows a stream downhill. Keep heading downhill after you leave the stream for another 100m until you spot the CBT sign on the right.

CBT (☎ after hour 2 19 62, 2 56 43; cbt_ja@rambler.rudm; 250-300som) The best digs in town are the 15 or so CBT-affiliated homestays scattered around the village. These aren't always easy to find or centrally located, so call into the office to check out your options.

our pick **Maksudov Mirzarahim** (Rodopad 58; dm 300som) To get here, take the road running along the left side of the bazaar. It's a 10-minute, uphill walk on a windy dirt road. Take the fifth road on the right and look out for the CBT sign. Maksudov is a local walnut gatherer and a fine host. Delicious food is served on a fantastic deck with views over the 'small waterfall' river. Recommended.

The traditional **Chaikhana Chinar** (mains 20som), just across the river from the village square in front of the mosque has been serving green tea for centuries and is still a popular haunt of the silver-bearded elders who gather here.

The *manty* served in the chaikhana next to the bazaar also comes recommended by local NGO volunteers.

Getting There & Away

From Bazaar Korgon take an hourly (until 4.30pm) Arslanbob bus to the end of the line (35som to 45som, 2½ hours) or grab a seat in a shared taxi (50som to 60som). There are also three absurdly full buses a day from Bazaar Korgon to Kyzyl Ünkür (65km) via Arslanbob. To go to Sary-Chelek, head from Bazaar Korgon to Tashkömür.

From Jalal-Abad, take an hourly bus (40 minutes) or shared taxi (25som to 35som per seat) to Arslanbob. A taxi from Arslanbob to Jalal-Abad costs around 400som.

JALAL-ABAD ДЖАЛАЛ-АБАД

☎ 3722 / pop 74,000

Jalal-Abad (the City of Jalal, after a 13th century warrior) may be Kyrgyzstan's third-largest city but you wouldn't know it from its laid-back, easy-going feel. In its Soviet heyday the town boasted an upmarket health resort, still alive today but none-too-healthy. Most everything of use to travellers can be found on Lenina

between the bazaar in the northwest and Hotel Mölmöl (a 10-minute walk) in the southeast.

Information

CBT (☎ after hr 2 19 62, 2 56 43; cbt_ja@rambler.ru; Toktogul 3-20; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Contact Ruhsora Abdullaeva in Russian or Shakhnaufa in English. This helpful branch has photocopy maps, offers local accommodation and transport, and arranges horse treks to Sailmaluu Tash from its western approach. From the bazaar head along Lenina to tree-lined Toktogul, turn right and it's near the second crossroad on the left.

Kazkommerts Bank (☎ 58 52 57; Lenina 14; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM, cashes travellers cheques (3% commission) and exchanges US dollars and euros.

Sputnik Agency (☎ 5 07 06; Lenina 17) Opposite Hotel Mölmöl, it sells airline tickets.

Titan Internet (☎ 2 10 00; Lenina 26A; per hr 20som) Also downloads flash cards and burns CDs.

Sights

Jalal-Abad thermal springs (☎ 6.30-9am, noon-2pm & 5-8pm) have been attracting pilgrims from as far away as India and Afghanistan since the 10th century and are still the city's chief attraction. Locals clutching empty bottles wait at the wooden circular building for the doors to be unlocked thrice daily in order to get a dose of the curative, sulphuric waters.

In the same park you will also find the ratty-around-the-edges, Soviet era **Jalal-Abad Sanatorium**. The complex is a confusing labyrinth of several buildings; ask for the administration office past the **Lenin statue**. Here you can arrange to be kneaded like a piece of dough. A neck-twisting massage costs a mere 50som but it's worth shelling out an extra 50som for the full spine-cracking, shoulder-slapping, back massage. Acupuncture (50som) is also available; the masseuse however does not use disposable needles and therefore, not recommended.

Shared taxis depart regularly from the intersection of Lenina and Toktogul (10som) for the park gates. Ask for the 'sanatorium'.

Sleeping

Hotel Mölmöl (☎ 5 50 59; Lenina 17; s without/private shower 211/250som, d 460/500som, tr 538/598som, lux 915som) This spartan, but essentially clean, ex-Soviet survivor offers standard rooms with either communal or attached bathrooms. If the blood splatters on the Brezhnev-era wallpaper are anything to go by, the mosquitoes here can get vicious.

Matlyba's homestay (☎ 2 33 70; Toktogul 33; dm 350som) If the CBT office is closed, try the house behind mint-green walls, on the opposite side of the street. Run enthusiastically by a motherly Uzbek woman, the garden has a *takhta* (bed-like sitting platform), which is a fine spot to have a beer.

Nigora Homestay (☎ 2 56 43; Chutskaya 33; dm 450som) This delightful homestay has three guest rooms and a staggering amount of bedding – the work of the three daughters who, as is the Uzbek custom, make the mattresses (*korpa*) and blankets (*aykandoz*) for their wedding day. It's a 15-minute walk north from Lenina up Erkindik; at the fork in the road take the right branch, it's just around the bend.

The CBT offers 14 comfortable homestays (350-450som), all of which are good, although some are a little way from the centre. Meals are 100som.

Eating

Café Alymbekdatka (☎ 0502-26 25 83; cnr Lenina & Erkindik; mains 50som; ☎ lunch & dinner) Located on the same intersection as Hotel Mölmöl this seasonal café has pleasant tea-beds shaded by colourful awnings. There's no menu but it's a great spot to try *kymys* and *kurdoch* (mutton and potato) – eat it quickly, before the fat congeals.

Café Navruz (☎ 2 10 90; Toktogul park; mains 60-150som; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's the newie in town. If Jalal-Abad had much hustle and bustle, this would be the place to escape it. It has a great parkside location; just off Lenina, inside a grand, blue building with a huge wrap-around balcony.

There are a number of cafés around the small square on Lenina between Toktogul and Erkindik. All are cheap, serving decent soups, Russian standards and Central Asian favourites. In the evening the place takes on a beer-garden vibe.

Getting There & Around

AIR

Kyrgyzstan Airlines and AC Kyrgyzstan fly six times a week to/from Bishkek (US\$40 to US\$50). Buy tickets at the airport or Sputnik Agency. Marshrutkas 1 and 5 from the centre go to the airport via the bus station. A taxi to the airport costs 50som to 80som.

BUS

Scheduled buses depart for Bazaar Korgon (for Arslanbob) every 20 minutes (20som, 30

minutes); Tashkömür at 8am, 12.50pm and 3.15pm (90som, three hours); and Kerben at 8.40am, 1pm and 2.50pm (125som, four to five hours). Minibuses to Osh leave every half-hour or so until 5pm (70som).

Also departing from the bus station, shared taxis run frequently to Osh (150som) and Özgön (70som), Bazaar Korgon (40som) and less frequently to Tashkömür (120som).

For villages neighbouring Jalal-Abad you'll need to head for the local bus stand in the far northern corner of the bazaar past the fresh produce. Here you'll also find private cars (1200som in a Volga) and minibuses (700som a seat) going to Bishkek. Shared Nivas and 4WDs for the mountain route to Kazarman (400som per seat) also depart from near here.

Minibus 10 runs along Lenina from the Hotel Mölmöl to the bazaar and bus station 3km to the west (5som). A private taxi to the bus station costs 50som to 80som.

AROUND JALAL-ABAD

Ortuk

About 60km north of Jalal-Abad is the village of **Ortuk**, a CBT-supported destination set in walnut and cherry forests. Community-Based Tourism has four homestays (B&B 300-350som) in the village, from where you can make day horse trips to local *jailoos* and a cave complex. Contact CBT in Jalal-Abad (opposite) for details. The local bus stand, north of the bazaar in Jalal-Abad has daily buses to Ortuk and nearby Kara-Alma. Otherwise hire a car through CBT for around 1440som for an overnight return trip.

ÖZGÖN УЗГҮН

☎ 3233

Özgön (Uzgen), 55km northeast of Osh, is today best known as the centre of three nights of ferocious Kyrgyz-Uzbek fighting in 1990 (p334). Few outward scars are evident today. The town is nominally 85% Uzbek; locals say it was about two-thirds Uyghur in pre-Soviet days.

Özgön is claimed to be the site of a series of citadels dating back to the 1st century BC; there is also a story that the town began as an encampment for some of Alexander the Great's troops. It was one of the multiple Karakhanid capitals in the 10th and 11th centuries.

All that remains of this history is a quartet of Karakhanid buildings – three joined 12th-century **mausoleums** and a stubby 11th-century **minaret** (whose top apparently fell down in an earthquake in the 17th century),

faced with very fine ornamental brickwork, carved terracotta and inlays of stone. Each mausoleum is unlike the others, though all are in shades of red-brown clay (there were no glazed tiles at this point in Central Asian history). In the corner of the right-hand-side mausoleum, a small section has been deliberately left off to reveal older layers of the middle one (the Mausoleum of Nasr ibn Ali, founder of the Karakhanids). You can climb the minaret for 5som.

Apart from the architectural attractions Özgön's bazaar is an interesting place to wander around, particularly if you haven't seen much of Uzbekistan.

To get to the mausoleums turn right out of the main (new) bus station on Manas. The road curves to the right past the entrance to the bazaar, which is where shared taxis and minibuses will probably drop you off. From the bazaar it's a 10-minute walk to the statue of Lenin (opposite the post office), from where you can see the minaret in the square behind.

Sleeping & Eating

Kurmanjau Datka (☎ 0502-76 24 80; Manas 74/1; d 500som) It's about 400m from the bazaar, on the left, behind a fence of blue-and-yellow latticework. This hotel and café has four rooms, all decorated with wallpaper that belongs in a museum and run by a lady with an extremely loud voice.

Restaurant Almaz (☎ 2 61 20; Manas; mains 50-60som) Probably the best in town, with dishes such as trout in champagne (65som) and lots of good salads.

The best atmosphere comes free with the *shashlyk* in the bazaar chaikhans.

Getting There & Away

Shared taxis to Jalal-Abad lurk down a side street, a block east of the bazaar, near Restaurant Almaz, and cost 60som a seat. Shared taxis to Osh cost 50som and run all day.

AROUND ÖZGÖN

The village of **Ak-Terek**, about 60km east of Özgön, has five **homestays** (B&B 250som), which can be arranged through village head Jengish Akmatiev. Daily buses run every afternoon to Ak-Terek (40som) from Özgön's old bus station.

From Ak-Terek you can take a horse 35km further to Kara Shoro National Park, where

there are yurtstays. An adventurous option is the seven-day horse trek along the Jassy River and over the Fergana range to the Arpa Valley, and from there to Naryn.

OSH

☎ 3222 / pop 300,000

Osh is Kyrgyzstan's second-biggest city and the administrative centre of the huge, populous province that engulfs the Fergana Valley on the Kyrgyzstan side. It is one of the region's genuinely ancient towns (with a history dating back to at least the 5th century BC) but few souvenirs remain. In many ways it's still quite a Soviet place: whereas other cities scrubbed Lenin's name from their street maps, Osh merely shifted it politely one block away. A huge Lenin statue still stands opposite the city administration building.

Osh suffers a kind of demographic schizophrenia, being a major centre of Kyrgyzstan but with a strong (40%) Uzbek population more in tune with Uzbekistan and the rest of the Fergana Valley, but isolated from it by one of the world's more absurd international borders.

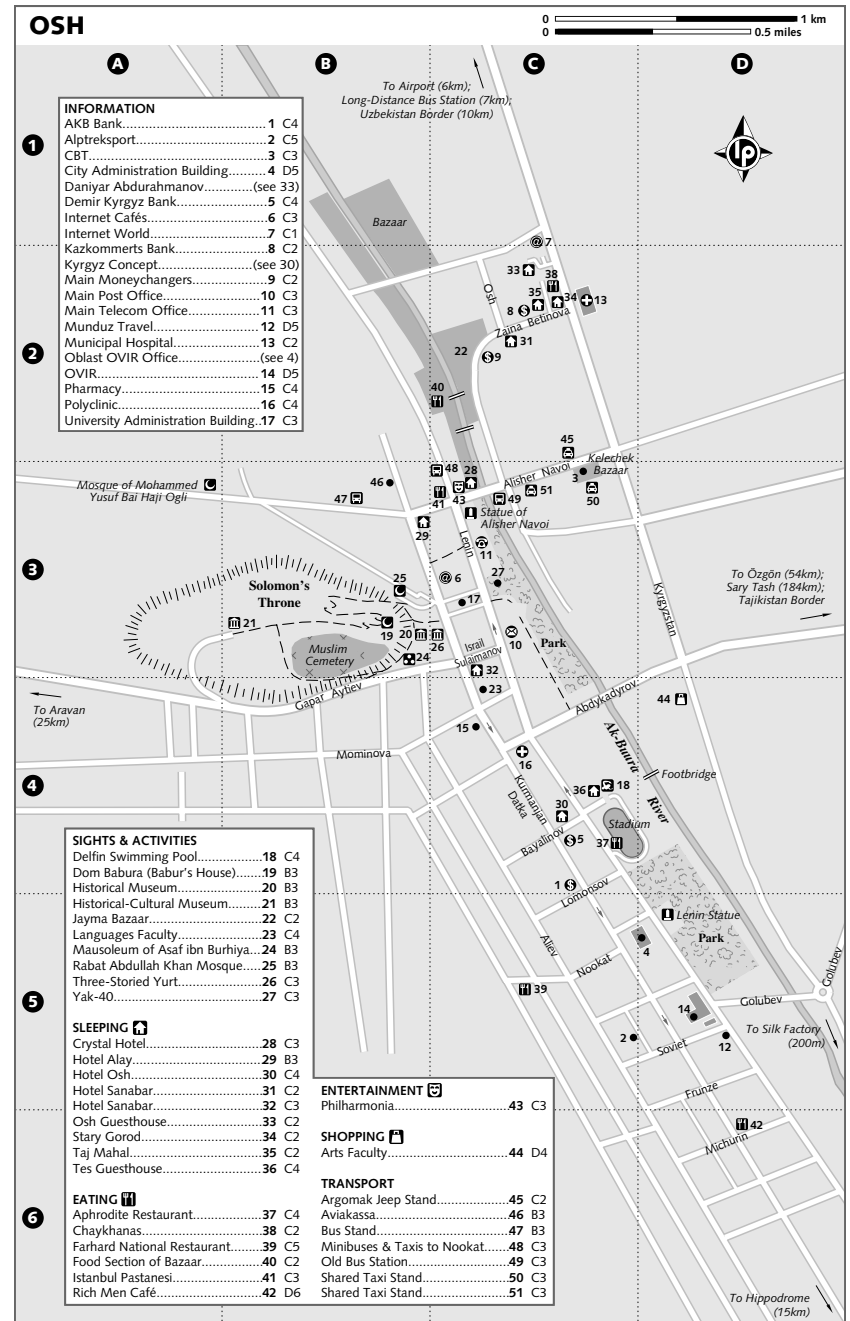
History

The standard refrain from anyone you ask is 'Osh is older than Rome'. Legends credit all sorts of people with its founding, from King Solomon (Suleyman) to Alexander the Great. Certainly it must have been a major hub on the Silk Road from its earliest days. The Mongols smashed it in the 13th century but in the following centuries it bounced back, more prosperous than ever.

More recently, 'Osh' has become a byword for ethnic conflict in the festering, gerrymandered closeness of the Fergana Valley. In fact the worst of 'Osh' took place 55km away in Özgön, during three nights of savage Uzbek-Kyrgyz violence in June and July 1990, during which at least 300 people (some unofficial estimates run to 1000) died from a variety of ugly causes while Soviet military and police authorities stood oddly by.

Although the largest group, the Uzbeks, dominate local business, Kyrgyzstan has forced upon them an almost totally Kyrgyz (and apparently widely corrupt) municipal administration, by which they feel constantly 'plundered'.

Rumours abound of weapons stockpiled for future conflicts. But considering the likelihood



that most people living around Osh and Özgön – Kyrgyz and Uzbek alike – have friends or family members who were murdered in 1990, the wonder is how many Kyrgyz and Uzbeks remain close friends (or as married couples) and how determined most of them are to get along.

Perhaps to improve flagging morale and stir up some postindependence patriotism the year 2000 was celebrated as the 3000th year of Osh.

Orientation

Osh sprawls across the valley of the Ak-Buura (White Camel) River, flowing out of the Pamir Alay mountains. The city's most prominent landmark is 'Solomon's Throne', a craggy mountain that squeezes right up to the river from the west.

Along the west bank run two parallel main roads – one-way south-bound Kurmanjan Datka and one-way north-bound Lenin.

Osh's old bus station (*stary avtovokzal*) is on Alisher Navoi just east of the river, while the new, long-distance one (*novyy avtovokzal*) is about 8km north of the town centre. The airport is about five minutes by bus from the new bus station.

Osh is big on manholes but not so manhole covers. At night keep an eye out for them – it's hard to trek with a broken leg.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés sprout like mushrooms in Osh. There is a good crop currently around the university buildings on Kurmanjan Datka.

Internet World (☎ 5 60 38; Kyrgyzstan; per hr 30som) Also has internet telephone and can burn digital photos to CD.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Municipal hospital (cnr Zaina Betinova & Kyrgyzstan)
Polyclinic (health centre; Abdykadyrov)

MONEY

In general it's easiest to change cash (including Uzbek sum and Tajiksomani) at the various moneychangers' kiosks, a collection of which can be found east of the Jayma Bazaar. Shop around and check your change.

Demir Kyrgyz Bank (☎ 5 65 55; Kurmanjan Datka 180A; ☎ 8.45am-noon & 1-3.30pm Mon-Thu, until 1.30pm Fri) It changes travellers cheques and gives Visa cash advances.

Kazkommerts Bank (Zaina Betinova; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) Next door to Taj Mahal Hotel, it has an ATM and cashes travellers cheques for a 3% commission.

POST & TELEPHONE

Main post office (Lenin 320; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)
Main telecom office (Lenin 422; ☎ 24hr) Fax available.

REGISTRATION & VISAS

The **OVIR** (Lenin) is at the back (southwest corner) of a building a block southeast of the City Administration Building. Go to the Inspector's office (Room 4). Fees are paid at the AKB Bank.

Visa extensions can be given at the 4th floor of the **City Administration Building** for US\$53. For reasons known only to the city's bureaucracy the same visa extension is 600som in the **oblast OVIR office** (☎ closed Tue, Thu & Sun) through a smaller entrance on the southern side of the same building.

TOURIST INFORMATION

CBT (☎ 3 16 91; 3rd fl, Kelechek Plaza Trade Centre) Was in a state of flux at time of research and had yet to open office doors at this new location. If problems persist, see Daniyar Abdurahmanov for tourist information (see below).

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Alptreksport (☎ /fax 7 69 06, 2 30 01; Gogol 3) Yury and Sasha Lavrushin, two brothers, veterans of the Soviet sports agency Sovintersport's International Mountaineering Camp (IMC) Pamir, organise mountaineering, trekking and caving trips, including some around Sary-Chelek, Achik, Jiptik Pass (4185m) and Sary Moghul in the Alay Valley. Yury speaks English and prefers advance bookings.

Daniyar Abdurahmanov (☎ 502-372311; www.oshkg.info) In lieu of an organised CBT office, Daniyar, the operator of Osh Guesthouse, has become the unofficial tourist information centre by default. Contact him to arrange competitively priced transport to Kashgar via the Irkeshtam Pass and personal guiding/translating services.

Kyrgyz Concept (☎ 5 94 50, ☎ /fax 2 79 91; osh@concept.kg; Osh Hotel, Bayalinov 1) A branch of the reliable Bishkek company, strong on air tickets.

Munduz Travel (☎ 5 55 00, ☎ /fax 2 22 76; munduz_tourist@hotmail.com; Soviet 1) Professional company that organises group and individual tours. It also operates an upmarket guesthouse (B&B US\$20 to US\$35 per person) in town and can arrange transport to Irkeshtam (overnighting in its yurt camp near Sary Tash, US\$10 per person), Batken, Pik Lenin base camp, Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Tajikistan. Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO) permits for Tajikistan cost US\$25 and take a day to organise.

Sights

You might find keen students of English or other languages to act as unofficial guides to the city at Osh University's **Languages Faculty** (Infac; Kurmanjan Datka 250).

BAZAAR

The thunderous daily **Jayma Bazaar** is one of Central Asia's best markets, teeming with Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks dealing in everything from traditional hats and knives to pirated cassettes, horseshoes (forged at smithies in the bazaar), Chinese tea sets and abundant seasonal fruit and vegetables. It stretches for about 1km along the west side of the river, and crosses it in several places. It's most dynamic on Sunday morning, and almost deserted on Monday.

SOLOMON'S THRONE & AROUND

A jagged, barren rock that seems to loom above the city wherever you go, **Solomon's Throne** has been a Muslim place of pilgrimage of some importance for centuries, supposedly because the Prophet Mohammed once prayed here. From certain perspectives it's said to resemble a reclining pregnant woman, and is especially favoured by hopeful mothers.

In 1497, 14-year-old Zahiruddin Babur, newly crowned king of Fergana built himself a little shelter and private mosque on the rock's high eastern promontory. In later years this came to be something of an attraction in its own right. It collapsed in an earthquake in 1853 and was rebuilt. Then in the 1960s it was destroyed by a mysterious explosion; most local people are convinced it was a Soviet attempt to halt the persistent pilgrim traffic and put a chill on 'superstition' (ie Islam). After independence it was rebuilt.

Local people call it **Dom Babura**, Babur's House. If you speak Russian, the friendly Uzbek caretaker will tell you more, and offer you a prayer for a few som. The steep 25-minute climb begins at a little gateway behind a futuristic silver dome on Kurmanjan Datka. The promontory offers long views but little to see except for a vast **Muslim cemetery** at the foot of the hill. Dusk is a good time to visit.

Nearby are three museums collectively referred to as the **Historical Archaeological Museum Complex** (☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm), although don't expect the locals to recognise such a mouthful of English. All three museums keep the same hours.

The **Historical Museum** (admission 50som, photos 10som each, guides 15som), built during the Osh 3000-year celebrations, is the best of the three. It's strong on local archaeology and ethnography but has little info in English. There are some great weapons, displayed as if caught up in a mad whirlwind.

Outside the giant **three-storied yurt** (admission 25som) has a collection of national clothing, traditional textiles and *shyrdaks*.

Up the hill is the last of the trio, the **Historical-Cultural Museum** (admission 50som). With typical Soviet subtlety, a hole was blasted in the side of this sacred mountain into one of its many caves, and a grotesque sheet-metal front stuck on – a carbuncle now visible from great distances. Inside is a series of badly lit exhibits of potsherds, old masonry, rocks, bugs and many stuffed animals.

Back down at the bottom of the hill is the small **Rabat Abdullah Khan Mosque**, dating from the 17th or 18th century but rebuilt in the 1980s. It's a working mosque (ie male visitors only, and by permission only; shoes off at the entrance). The small **Mausoleum of Asaf Ibn Burhiya** to the south along the base of the hill is of little historical or architectural interest.

OTHER SIGHTS

There isn't much, other than a long riverbank **park** stretching from Alisher Navoi to Abdykadyrov. A central feature is an old **Yak-40** plane, a one-time video salon, looking poised to leap over the river. There's a *palvankhana* (wrestling hall) here but wrestling bouts are infrequent.

Locals swim in the **Ak-Buura River** during summer or head to the **Delfin swimming pool** (adult/child per session 30/10som; ☎ sessions 9am-2pm & 2-6pm), a stone's throw away. Neither are particularly clean.

Osh **hippodrome**, 16km south of town at Toluken village (minibus 24), puts on Kyrgyz national sports and eagle-hunting competitions during national holidays.

Sleeping BUDGET

Couples and small groups should consider taking advantage of the per room rate of some midpriced hotels, which effectively reduces prices to about 200som per person with private bathroom. Community-Based Toursim (opposite) will undoubtedly offer homestays when its new office is open.

Osh Guesthouse (☎ 3 06 29; www.oshguesthouse.hotbox.ru; Flat 48, Apt 8, Kyrgyzstan; dm/d US\$4/6.50) A popular backpacker crash pad with the only dorms in town. It can get very cramped when full; you'll either love it or hate it. Pluses include a hot shower, laundry service, meals (40som to 60som) and internet access. The owner, Daniyar Abdurahmanov, is a fount of knowledge. Solo travellers with the view of sharing transport to the Irkeshtam Pass often meet here. The apartment can be hard to find. Take the alley by a row of kiosks, take a diagonal right by the rubbish dump and turn left at the second apartment building; it's the third entrance on the left, top floor.

Hotel Alay (☎ 5 77 33; palvan@yandex.ru; Alisher Navoi; s 252-400som, d 308-504som, tr 308som, lux 1000som) This is an ex-Soviet dinosaur in a prime location with cheap but tired and dated rooms. Quality runs the gauntlet from rooms that share the common toilets (no seat or light bulb, so expect to squat in the dark) to those with en suites and hot-water showers.

Hotel Sanabar (☎ 2 54 37; cnr Kurmanjan Datka & Israil Sulaimanov; d 400som) It has tiny rooms with even tinier bathrooms. The staff is surly, preferring to snarl than smile, but the rooms are essentially clean and the showers have occasional hot water.

Hotel Sanabar (☎ 3 45 27; Zaina Betinova; d 400som) Same name, different deal. The bare rooms here share a clean communal shower. Keep in mind this place is opposite a lively bazaar, which is either an exciting plus or a noisy intrusion, depending on how you feel about lively bazaars.

Stary Gorod (☎ 2 49 24; Zaina Betinova 18A; 4-person apt 1500som; 🍷) These self-contained apartments are a good deal with air-con, 40-channel TVs, twin bedrooms, separate bathrooms and fully equipped kitchens.

MIDRANGE

Taj Mahal (☎ 3 96 52; Zaina Betinova; d 600, lux 800som) Small and bright, this Indian-built hotel has clean and pleasant doubles with hot water and towels. There are only five rooms so try to book ahead.

Crystal Hotel (☎ 2 04 47; Alisher Navoi 50A; tw with shared bathroom US\$20, s/d US\$50/70, lux ste US\$100; 🍷) Has a central location with small, clean rooms equipped with minifridge, TV and air-con. Rooms overlooking the main room are a little noisy.

Tes Guesthouse (☎ 2 15 48; guesthouse@oshmail.kg; Say Boyu 5; s/d from €20/30; 📺) Tourists are welcome

although this guesthouse is used mostly by NGO consultants. The pleasant piney rooms come with spotless bathrooms and are decorated with national handicrafts from local artisans. There's a coffee machine, TV room, internet access and a washing machine. Prices include breakfast. Recommended.

Hotel Osh (☎ 7 56 14; Bayalino; s/d US\$44/48, lux US\$150) Still reliving its Soviet glory days and now the biggest rip-off in town. It's ridiculously over priced; the rooms are old and the toilets leak. On the plus side, the hotel makes for a great landmark; taxi drivers sometimes refer to it as the Intourist hotel or Osh Nuru and there is the casino...

Eating

The chaikhans along Kyrgyzstan near the intersection with Zaina Betinova are everything good teahouses should be; kebab masters lovingly fanning *shashlik*, tea beds, beer on tap and a lively evening atmosphere. Be careful not to be dragged into a round (or two) of vodka shots! Self caterers will appreciate the abundance of groceries and fresh vegies available in the food section of Jayma Bazaar. Good natured haggling may go down well but most produce has a fixed price and remember that lean meat is considerably cheaper than fatty cuts.

Aphrodite Restaurant (☎ 0502-743577; Lenin; salad 35-70som, mains 65-80som; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A good restaurant by the entrance to the stadium with indoor and outdoor seating and beer on tap.

Rich Men Café (☎ 2 43 03; Kurmanjan Datka; salads 35-50som, mains 75-120som; 🍷 lunch & dinner) South of town and recognisable by the blue awning, the Rich Men Café is top-notch. Good meat and fish dishes are complemented by specialities such as eggs stuffed with red or black caviar (80som) and excellent service. Wine and Soviet champagne are served, as are excellent beer snacks.

IstanbulPastanesi (☎ 22451; Alisher Navoi; meals 45som; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Bypass the burgers and head straight for the delicious honey-drenched baklava, a guaranteed taste sensation.

our pick Farhad National Restaurant (Nookat 83; group serves only; 🍷 dinner) Join the celebrating locals in one of the 20 private rooms surrounding an open courtyard. Specialising in traditional Kyrgyz cuisine, mains are ordered by weight and 1kg of *plov* (400som) feeds six adults. The minimum order is 500g and orders need to be placed by midafternoon to allow the chefs time to prepare (Munduz Travel

can help). Order *ysryk* (burning grass), take a deep breath and kick back on your *topchan* (tea bed). Recommended.

Shopping

By the entrance to the Jayma Bazaar is one of the best and cheapest places in Kyrgyzstan to buy an *ak kalpak* (from 60som); for an exceptional statement go the full nine yards and get a towering monstrosity with scrollwork (250som). Pottery and clay Central Asian figurines can be bought cheaply in the **Arts Faculty** (Kyrgyzstan 80).

Getting There & Away

AIR

There's an **aviakassa** (booking office; ☎ 2 22 11; Kurmanjan Datka 287; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri), just northwest of Hotel Alay.

From Osh there is a daily flight to Bishkek (US\$40 to US\$50), and twice-weekly flights to both Ürümqi, China (US\$220) and Moscow (US\$225 to US\$300).

BUS & CAR

The old bus station and the shared taxis near Jayma Bazaar are Osh's transport hub.

From the old bus station, minibuses leave for Özgön (40som, every 40 minutes), Jalal-Abad (70som, every 20 minutes), Daroot-Korgon (400som, 10am) and all points in Kyrgyzstan's southern arm (Sary Tash, Kyzyl-Kiya, Aravan, Gulcha and others), though departures for these latter destinations are a little unreliable. Buses to Batken (250som) via Kyzyl-Kiya also leave from the old bus station although, as they run via Sokh, an Uzbek visa is required.

Shared taxis for all of the above run from here or near here, the locals will soon point you in the right direction (often a stand behind Kelechek Bazaar). Typically a seat in a shared taxi is about 50som more expensive than a minibus fare. Shared taxis also run to Toktogul, Tashkömür and Kerben when full.

Shared-taxi prices to Bishkek fluctuate dramatically as seasonal labour travels to and from Moscow for work. When demand is high (April to July) you can expect to pay as much as 1200som per seat to Bishkek and only 600som for the same journey in reverse. This trend is reversed when the labour force returns to Osh in winter.

If you want to hire transport to Irkeshtam or Tajikistan and the Pamir Hwy, you could

ask around here or try a travel agency that will charge around US\$150 for a trip to Achik Tash in the Alay Valley. Private cars organised through a travel agency cost 2500som to Arslanbob and US\$130 to Batken (avoiding the enclaves).

The Argomak 4WD stand just uphill from the old bus station has early morning 4WDs and minibuses to Sary Moghul (450som) and a Daroot-Korgon bus (300som, 10 hours), both via Sary Tash.

Another stand west of Hotel Alay has buses to Aravan and Nookat. Minibuses and taxis to Nookat run from just behind the Philharmonia.

Minibuses 107 and 113 run from opposite the old bus station to the Uzbek border (5som, 10km) via the long-distance bus station. Minibuses 136 and 137 travel north on Lenin from Hotel Alay to the Uzbek border.

Getting Around

Marshrutnoe 102 runs southbound on Kurmanjan Datka from the old bus station to Hotel Osh and Turbaza Ak-Buura; it returns northbound down Lenin. Other southbound minibuses on Kurmanjan Datka include 101A, 134, 135, 125, 138 and 114. Virtually all minibuses pass by Jayma Bazaar at some stage.

Minibus 102A and 107A shuttle between the airport and the Jayma Bazaar in the centre of town (5som).

A taxi around the centre costs between 30som and 50som, 80som to 100som to the airport and 50som to the new bus station.

OSH TO IRKESHTAM PASS

The Irkeshtam Pass opened to international traffic in May 2002 and quickly superseded the Torugart as the most popular route into western China from Central Asia. It reconnects the Fergana Valley with Kashgar along an ancient branch of the Silk Road.

Sary Tash

☎ 3243

Sary Tash is conveniently situated at the convergence of three roads and makes a good place to break the Murgab (Tajikistan) to Osh or Kashgar (China) to Osh trip. Local rumours abound that the town is also a major stopover for smugglers trafficking opium and hashish from Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Because of the bleak climatic conditions there is little agriculture and most men work at the border

TRAVELLING TO THE IRKESHTAM PASS

The east-bound road that leaves Osh for China climbs gently into the Alay Range via the Jiptik Pass (4185m) and the village of Gulcha. There is a roadside café and a CBT homestay in Gulcha but little reason (other than some hot springs) to overnight. The road, that had initially followed the Taldyk River, now follows the Gülchö as it climbs – this time in earnest – the steeper but lower Taldyk Pass (3615m) to the surprisingly open Alay Valley and Sary Tash.

While it is possible to leave Osh at 1am to arrive at Irkeshtam Pass by 9am you'll end up travelling in the dark and miss much of the stunning scenery. Instead consider starting later and overnighing in Sary Tash and then continuing at 6am the following day to the border controls at Irkeshtam.

From Sary Tash the road rapidly deteriorates into a corrugated dirt track that guarantees to rattle your teeth from your skull. To travel the 90km takes between two and three hours depending on how recently it has rained. This road, which was due to be upgraded in 2004, hasn't seen the business end of a bulldozer for some time. The hamlet of Nura is 7km before the border.

Getting There & Away

Arranging the whole trip with a travel agency from Osh to Irkeshtam (275km) currently costs from around US\$135 to US\$150 per car, which can seat four. Most travel agencies in Osh can organise a car although people generally use either Osh Guesthouse (p338) or Munduz Travel (p336). Either way it is important to explain exactly what is expected, where you will spend the night and agree on a price beforehand. The Osh Guesthouse car aims to depart every Tuesday and Thursday in summer.

On the Chinese side it is possible to catch a shared taxi (from US\$9 per person) to Kashgar although you'll have to bargain hard. Be ruthless. Most shocking of all – the road is not only sealed, it even has kerbs.

There is a direct bus between Osh and Kashgar (US\$50 plus 100som) that leaves the Osh long-distance bus station twice weekly (Wednesday and Sunday). Be warned that you may have to overnight on the bus or at the border so be sure to bring enough food and water.

The other option is to take the Daroot-Korgon bus (300som) from Osh's old bus station as far as Sary Tash and hitch to the border the next day. It is also worth asking around at the back far corner of the Argomak 4WD stand in Osh for cars bound for Sary Tash. In the morning locals often look for passengers here to help cover their fuel costs and the trip to Sary Tash can cost as little as 350som.

Hitching from Sary Tash to the border is fairly straight-forward as long as you start early enough to catch the Chinese Kamaz trucks as they pass. Expect the driver to ask for anything between 50som to 200som for the lift.

Travelling in reverse is just as simple. For a pack of cigarettes the Kyrgyz custom officials are happy to pop you on a Chinese truck for a mind-numbingly slow trip downhill to Sary Tash. From there you can catch the daily bus from Daroot-Korgon to Osh or hang around the town's main intersection from where impromptu shared taxis depart.

or are involved in animal husbandry. There is a small market on Wednesday.

Since the opening of the Irkeshtam Pass, locals have been quick to open their homes to tourists. The cafés and shops at the intersection can point the way.

The ladies at **Ieda Café & Hotel** (dm 100som) are super friendly and can help arrange transport to the border if you are hitching. In all there are three large lockable rooms and a smaller, less appealing room. Meals are 30som to 50som.

There's also a **homestay** (dm 200som). From the intersection take the road towards Sary Moghul but turn hard right taking the right fork in the road. The homestay is 50m up a dirt road in a house with blue doors and window frames. The price includes meals.

See above for travel info.

Crossing the Irkeshtam Pass

Crossing the **Irkeshtam Pass** (🚧 9am-noon & 2pm-3.30pm Mon-Fri) can be a time-consuming affair.

Ten kilometres before the border is the first of two checkpoints. Here everyone is required to show their passport so names can be matched to a master list of bus passengers. Assuming nobody had a last-minute name change the bus is allowed to continue to the second checkpoint and luggage inspection. Finally, you can expect to spend between 1½ to 2½ hours at the border itself depending on how many trucks are waiting before you.

If you are hitching, ask the border-post army officers to put you on a truck to cross the 7km of no-man's-land to the Chinese immigration (closed 11am to 2pm Kyrgyz time).

Unlike the Torugart, no permits are required to get to, or over, the pass.

See p349 for general advice.

ALAY VALLEY АЛАЙСКАЯ ДОЛИНА

The far southern arm of Kyrgyzstan is the exclusive turf of trekkers and mountaineers, consisting as it does mostly of the heavily glaciated Pamir Alay range, a jagged, 500km-long seam running from Samarkand to Xinjiang. The range is threaded right up the middle by the muddy Kyzyl-Suu River (known as the Surkhob further downstream in Tajikistan – the two names mean Red Water in Kyrgyz and Tajik respectively) to form the 60km-long Alay Valley, the heart of the Kyrgyz Pamir.

Today it is hard to believe that at one time two of Central Asia's earliest and busiest Silk Road branches crossed the Pamir Alay from Kashgar, at Kök-Art and at Irkeshtam. In the 19th century adventurers, explorers and spies roamed the area trying to curry favour with the Uzbek Khanate of Kokand and out do each other in a series of double-dealings and high-altitude espionage known in English as the Great Game and in Russian as the Tournament of Shadows (p45).

The Alay Valley is the main access point for mountaineering expeditions into Tajikistan's High Pamir – to 7495m Koh-i-Samani (formerly Pik Kommunizma, the highest point in the former USSR), 7134m Koh-i-Garmo (Pik Lenin) or 7105m Pik Korzhenevskaya.

Access from Kyrgyzstan is along the A372 from Osh, via Sary Tash and the 3615m Taldyk Pass. This is also the main route into Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region. It's possible to access the valley from Dushanbe in Tajikistan via the Garm Valley as well.

A trip into the Alay region is not a lightweight jaunt. There is little traffic on the main roads

and food supplies are limited, even in summer. From October to May the A372 is often closed by snow, and even in summer snow and rain-storms can appear without warning. The best trekking months are July and August.

For information on taking the M41 Pamir Hwy to Gorno-Badakhshan, see p386.

PERMITS

In theory you need a border zone permit to go within 50km of the CIS-Chinese border and the Alay Valley. However, the removal of the check-post at Sary Tash means that you will not be asked for this permit en route to the Alay Valley, only perhaps at Achik Tash base camp. This can change, so check with a trekking agency before setting off.

Trekking agencies (see below) can arrange a permit (US\$10) with a minimum of one week's notice if you need one. Make sure that the permit clearly mentions the Chong-Alay and Alay rayons of Osh *oblast*.

To travel the Pamir Hwy requires a Tajik GBAO permit, which travel agencies in Bishkek or Osh can arrange.

TREKKING

The Pamir Alay is one of the most remote and rugged parts of Central Asia – this is one place where you can't just head off with a 1970s Soviet map and a handful of Snickers bars. ITMC Tien-Shan, IMC Pamir, Dostuck Trekking, Ak-Sai Travel and Top Asia (p284) all organise trekking and mountaineering trips in both the Kyrgyz and Tajik sides of the valley. Munduz Travel and Alptreksport in Osh (p336) can also arrange trekking support; the latter has a lot of experience in the region.

Sary Moghul

📍 3243

The dusty village of Sary Moghul, 30km west of Sary Tash, offers the valley's best views of Pik Lenin. Up until 2004 the entire village and surrounding 37,000 hectares of arable land was rented by Tajikistan. The newly established CBT (contact Umar Tashbekov) in the village centre near the village administration office (*ail okmotu*) can arrange home-/yurtstays and horse treks to the Pik Lenin base camps.

The daily Daroot-Korgon bus passes through town (10am) on its way to/from Sary Tash (50som) and Osh (300som). The other option is to flag down a car as it leaves town to Sary

Tash (50som, one hour) or, if you are lucky, all the way to Osh (400som, six hours).

Pik Lenin & Achik Tash

Trekking possibilities in the Alay Valley are legion, but serious trekkers head for Pik Lenin (now officially called Koh-i-Garmo). The peak is known as one of the most accessible 7000-ers in the world. It is the highest summit of the Pamir Alay and lies right on the Kyrgyz–Tajik border. The snow-covered ridges and slopes are not technically difficult to climb with many ascents passing **Lipkin Rocks**, named after a pilot who crashed here and then calmly walked out.

Altitude sickness and avalanches are a serious problem; in 1991 an earthquake-triggered avalanche obliterated Camp II on the Razdelnaya approach, killing 43 climbers in the process. It remains the world's worst mountaineering disaster.

For details on trekking around Pik Lenin, see Frith Maier's *Trekking in Russia & Central Asia*.

At Achik Tash meadows (3600m), 30km south of Sary Moghul, IMC Pamir and most of the trekking agencies mentioned, p341, operate Pik Lenin base camps and programmes in summer. To get there you'll have to fix arrangements in advance.

There are weekly farmers markets in Daroot-Korgon (on Monday), Kashka-Suu (Tuesday) and Sary Moghul (Sunday) where you can buy basic foodstuffs. Several trailer shops offer the usual kiosk fare in Sary Tash. Beyond this bring all your own food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You should be able to hire a 4WD from Sary Moghul to Achik Tash (17km) for US\$20 return. A hired 4WD from Osh to Achik Tash can be negotiated down to US\$150 if you ask around the Argomak 4WD stand. Trekking-agency vehicles come at about US\$175 one way. Daniyar Abdurahmanov, Kyrgyz Concept and Munduz Travel (p336) all organise transport to Achik Tash; you may be able to work in with one of their trips to Irkeshtam Pass to help reduce the cost.

SOUTHWESTERN KYRGYZSTAN

The southern wall of the Fergana Valley forms a curious claw of Kyrgyz territory, although access to most of the mountain villages here comes from the Fergana Valley territory of Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. The beautiful val-

leys of the Turkestan ridge in particular offer superb trekking territory and the beautiful pyramid-shaped **Ak-Suu** peak (5359m), with its sheer 2km-high wall, is one of the world's best extreme rock-climbing destinations.

This mountain idyll was shattered, however, when Islamic militants from Tajikistan kidnapped Japanese geologists and then four American climbers here in 1999 and 2000 (p273). The valleys are now thought to be safe once again but you should check before heading off to the Karavshin, Leilek and Ak-Suu Valleys.

Even without the threat of political insurgency, this is not a particularly easy place to make your first Central Asian trek. Access can prove tricky (inter-republic buses have ground to a halt), and you'll need an Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik visa to transit hassle-free through these republics, as well as a spurious trekking permit. Moreover, some of the passes with Tajikistan are said to be mined. For the time being you are better off planning any trek in the region with an established trekking operator in Bishkek (p284) or Tashkent (p199).

Batken

Because of the difficulty and added expense of crossing the Tajik and Uzbek enclaves Batken remains largely unexplored and consequently has little tourist development. At the time of writing CBT were taking their first tentative steps in recruiting and training families to host homestays and it is best to contact the Bishkek office (p282) for details on homestays within this region.

The city has many cafés but only two hotels constructed for Soviet administrators a number of years ago that have seen little maintenance or custom since. Travellers have recommended the **B&B of Dalmira Checheeva** (14 Shestdyesat Let Oktyabria ulitsa).

Shared taxis to Osh and to Isfara (Uzbekistan) depart every morning from the post office. Buses from Batken to Osh and Isfara leave from the bus station early in the morning. Public transport to Batken passes through the enclaves. Even with multi-entry visas travellers have reported hassles at the borders. The best option is to use minor roads that scoot around the enclaves but, in doing so, you'll be forced to hire a taxi or arrange your own transport. Osh Guesthouse (p338) and Munduz Travel (p336) will arrange a car from Osh for US\$130 to US\$150.

KYRGYZSTAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Homestays are the bedrock of accommodation in rural Kyrgyzstan, particularly those of the CBT programme (p277), and always include breakfast. Even though the prices are listed as dorms you will usually not be expected to share rooms with strangers; however, friends travelling together will be expected to share a room. Most homestays are comfortable but not luxurious; a *shyrdak* rug and a snugly pile of duvets and pillows as bedding and an *umuvallnik* – a portable washbasin that stores water in a top compartment – for washing. The bathroom will often be a pit toilet (with a seat) and some homestays have Russian-style *banyas*. Yurtstays offer similar bedding, less privacy and (if you're lucky) basic outhouses. Non-CBT homestays are generally much less comfortable.

Different from yurtstays are private tourist yurt camps, mostly used by groups but open to anyone if there's space. Costs here are around US\$25 per person with three meals, and often include some horse riding or other activities.

The unravelling of the Soviet Union has left the once swanky sanatoria high and dry, devoid of customers but choc-bloc full of nostalgia.

The main cities (Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad and Karakol) all boast midrange hotels which are comfortable and clean but invariably come with peeling paint, pre-independence wallpaper and gurgling plumbing. Recent confidence in the tourist sector has seen im-

provements and this trend is expected to continue. Hotel accommodation seldom includes breakfast and since most rooms contain two beds the tariff for a single and a double are often the same, effectively doubling the cost for solo travelers.

Top-end accommodation is limited to Bishkek where you can expect a far higher standard (and price) equal to that of their international counterparts. Former Soviet flagship hotels have found privatisation difficult and while their flags may still be flying high they are ridiculously overpriced and under resourced.

ACTIVITIES

Four-Wheel-Drive Trips

There are several opportunities for 4WD safaris. One possible road leads from Talas over the Kara Bura Pass into the Chatkal river valley and then loops around to Sary-Chelek. Other tracks lead from Naryn to Barskoön, and Barskoön to Inylchek, through the high Tian Shan.

Horse Riding

Kyrgyzstan is the best place in Central Asia to saddle up and join the other nomads on the high pastures. Community-Based Tourism offices throughout the country can organise horse hire for around 70som per hour or 400som per day.

The horses often give the impression they're only a hoof-beat away from reverting to their wild roots and galloping off to a distant mountain pasture but novice riders are seldom given unruly horses if they make their concerns known.

With so many horse-trekking possibilities it is difficult to recommend one over another and it is worth asking other travelers for any new or outstanding routes. Community-Based Tourism is opening and closing routes continuously based on the location and availability of its guides in the summer *jailoos* however the following are outstanding:

- Horse trek over the 3570m Shamsy Pass from Salaral-Saz Jailoo to Tokmak (p317)
- Two- or three-day horse trips to/from Kyzart or Jumgal to Song-Köl (p318)
- Horse trek from Echki-Bashy to Bokon-bayevo or Song-Köl (five to six days; p321)

For organised trips, the following companies are recommended:

AsiaRando (☎ 3132-47710/47711, 517-73 97 78; www.asiarando.com; Padgornaya 67, Rot Front, Chuy Oblast)

PRACTICALITIES

- The *Times of Central Asia* (www.times-ca-europe.com) is the local English-language newspaper, based in Bishkek.
- Popular radio stations include *Kyrgyz Radio* and *Kyrgyzstan Obondoru* (Kyrgyzstan Melodies).
- The two major Kyrgyz TV stations are KTR – *Kyrgyz State Television* and *Radio Corporation* and KORT – *Kyrgyz Public Radio and Television*.
- The Secam system is used for videos.
- The electrical supply is 220V, 50 Hz
- Kyrgyzstan uses the metric system

POST-SOVIET NAME CHANGES

The Kyrgyz language has not been as bluntly imposed on nonspeakers in Kyrgyzstan as has Uzbek in Uzbekistan. In larger towns in the north at least, streets and squares are labelled in both Kyrgyz and Russian. In some smaller towns, the old Russian signs are still in place and Russian forms persist (in Osh and other towns in the south you'll hear Uzbek terms as well). Many Soviet-era names have been retained.

We try to use the most current names, but in each town we use the grammatical forms (Kyrgyz, Russian or Uzbek) that seem to be in common use. The government prefers to close hyphenated place names (such as Cholponata), which is yet to catch on with its citizenry (who prefer Cholpon-Ata).

A Kyrgyz street is *köchösü* (Russian: *ulitsa*), an avenue is *prospektisi* (Russian: *prospekt*), a boulevard *bulvary* (Russian: *bulvar*), a square *ayanty* (Russian: *ploshchad*).

Horse-riding trips to Song-Köl from its base in Rotfront village. Contact Gérard and Dominique Guillerm.

Shepherd's Way See p310 for details of trips around Lake Issyk-Köl.

Mountaineering

Kyrgyzstan is the major base for climbing expeditions to Khan Tengri (p312) and Pik Lenin (in Tajikistan but accessed from Kyrgyzstan; p342). There are many unclimbed peaks in the Kokshal range bordering China. Most of the Bishkek trekking agencies (p284) arrange mountaineering expeditions.

The Kyrgyz Alpine Club has a useful website (www.kac.centralasia.kg).

Rafting

Rafting is possible on the Kokomoron, Chuy, Naryn and Chong-Kemin Rivers (Grades II to V). The season runs from 25 June until 15 September and wetsuits are essential in the glacial melt water. Contact **Silk Road Water Centre** (p282) to take the plunge.

Skiing

Despite the fact that 94% of the country averages over 2700m, skiing is still in its infancy. Currently the only 'ski fields' are around Bishkek (p292) and Karakol (p309). The season runs mid-November until mid-March. With the advent of heli-skiing (p293) Russian-built MI-8 helicopters are ferrying adrenaline junkies to altitudes of over 4500m for descents of up to 5km.

Trekking

Covered in mountains and lakes, Kyrgyzstan offers unrivalled opportunities to take to the hills. Around Bishkek (p290), Karakol (p309), Kochkor (p318), Naryn (p320), Arslanbob (p331) and Sary-Chelek (p329) are the major

trekking regions although any CBT office will suggest countless alternatives.

TREKKING PERMITS

Trekking and mountaineering permits were abolished by the Kyrgyz government in 2002 but at least one local authority has tried to keep them in an effort to raise funds. Batken (for the Ak-Suu and Karavshin regions) charges US\$30 for a permit.

CUSTOMS

If you've bought anything that looks remotely antique and didn't get a certificate saying it's not, you can get one from the 1st floor of the Foreign Department of the **Ministry of Education, Science & Culture** (☎ 62 68 17; Room 210, cnr Tynystanov & Frunze).

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Kyrgyz Embassies in Central Asia

There are Kyrgyz embassies in the Central Asian capitals of Almaty (p178), Ashgabat (p437), Dushanbe (p392) and Tashkent (p262).

Kyrgyz Embassies & Consulates

If there is no Kyrgyz embassy in your country, inquire at the Kazakh embassy if there is one. There are additional embassies in Belarus, Ukraine, India, Malaysia, Switzerland and the UAE.

If you intend to cross into Kyrgyzstan from China over the Torugart Pass, you will need to secure your Kyrgyz visa in either Beijing or Ürümqi.

Austria (☎ 01-535 0378; fax 535 0379; krybot@mail.austria.eu.net; Naglergasse 25/5, 1010, Vienna)

Belgium (☎ 02-640 1868; aitmatov@photohall.skynet.be; 47 Rue de L'Abbaye, 1050, Brussels) Issues visas on the spot for US\$50.

China (☎ 010-6532 6458; kyrgyz@public3.bta.net.cn; 2-7-1 Ta Yuan Diplomatic Office Bldg, Liangmahe Naniu 14 hao, Chaoyang District, Beijing; ☎ 3-6pm Mon, Wed & Fri) Walk down San Li Tun Da Jie until it meets the river and turn left. It's a further five minutes along in an imposing building flying many flags. The embassy is on the 7th floor behind a small, unmarked white door next to the stairwell. A one-month tourist visa costs US\$55/110 and is issued in seven/three days. The Central Asia Hotel in Ürümqi issues visas for US\$56/112 in three/five days.

Germany Berlin (☎ 030-3478 1338; www.botschaft-kirgisien.de; Otto-Suhr-Allee 146, 10585); Bonn (☎ 0228-36 52 30; kirgistan.bonn@t-online.de; 194A Friesdorferstrasse, 53175); Frankfurt (☎ 069-9540 3926; Bronnerstrasse 20) A 30-day visa costs €50. Only German and Russian are spoken at the Berlin branch.

Iran Mashhad (☎ 051-818444); Tehran (☎ 021-229 8323, 283 0354, krembiri@kanoon.net; Bldg 12, 5th Naranjastan Alley, Pasdaran St)

Russia (☎ 095-237 4601/4882/4571; fax 237 4452; Bolshaya Ordynka ulitsa 64, 109017, Moscow) Also in Ekaterinburg.

Switzerland (☎ 022-707 9220; <http://missions.itu.int/kyrgyzstan>; 26 Rue Maunoir, 1207, Geneva)

Turkey Ankara (☎ 312-446 84 08; kirjiz-o@tr-net.net.tr; Boyabat Sokak 11, Gaziosmanpaşa, 06700); Istanbul (☎ 212-235 6767; genkon@tr.net; 7 Lamartin Caddesi, Taksim)

UK (☎ 020-7935 1462; www.kyrgyz-embassy.org.uk; Ascot House, 119 Crawford St, W1U 6BJ, London; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm) A one-/two-month tourist visa costs UK£45/60.

USA (☎ 202-338 5141; www.kyrgyzembassy.org; 1732 Wisconsin Ave, NW, Washington DC 20007) A one-month tourist visa costs US\$50 and is ready in 10 days. Also a consulate in New York.

Embassies & Consulates in Kyrgyzstan

Some of the smaller embassies listed below are little more than a rented room in an obscure apartment block and can be hard to find. All the following are in Bishkek (area code ☎ 312; see Map p280). For information on visas for onward travel see p347.

For letters of support try travel agencies (p282) such as Kyrgyz Concept and CAT. The nearest Turkmen embassy is in Almaty.

Afghanistan (☎ 42 63 72; cnr Ayni & Toktonaliev) Run by a relative of General Dostum, the Uzbek warlord based in Mazar-e Sharif.

China (☎ 22 24 23; fax 6630 14; Toktogul 196; ☎ 9.15am-noon Mon, Wed & Fri)

France (☎ 66 00 53; ag-consul@elcat.kg; cnr Razzakov & Kiev) Look for the model Eiffel Tower outside.

Germany (☎ 66 66 12; fax 66 66 30; gerembi@elcat.kg; Razzakov 28) Rumoured to be moving near the American embassy soon.

India (☎ 21 08 62; fax 62 07 08; 3rd fl, Chuy 164-A; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Mon-Fri)

Iran (☎ 22 69 64; fax 62 00 09; Razzakov 36; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Japan (☎ 61 18 75; fax 61 18 82; Frunze 503)

Kazakhstan (☎ 66 04 15; Mira 95A; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Thu)

Netherlands (☎ 66 02 22; fax 66 02 88; Suite 1, Tynystanov 199) Honorary consulate.

Pakistan (☎ 62 17 02; pakemb@asiainfo.kg; Serov 37; ☎ 9-11am Mon-Fri) May well refer you to a travel agency.

Russia (☎ 22 17 75; rusemb@imfiko.bishkek.kg; Manas 55) This consular office is the one to get visas.

Tajikistan (☎ 51 23 43; fax 51 14 64; Kara-Dar'inskaya 36, Kök-Jar microrayon; ☎ 9-11am Mon-Fri) The embassy is lost in suburbia. Take trolleybus 17 to the Kök-Jar *mikrorayon* (region). The trolley will turn twice, first left, then right. After the second turn watch for Pizza Inn on the left and get off. Walk down the road alongside Pizza Inn until a T-intersection. In front of you is the Tajik Embassy.

Turkey (☎ 22 78 82; fax 66 05 20; Moskva 89; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

UK (☎ 65 28 55; Kalik Akiyeva 11/24) This is an Honorary Consulate; behind the World Bank.

USA (☎ 55 12 41; pao@usis.gov.kg; Mira 171)

Uzbekistan (☎ 66 30 78, 66 20 65; fax 66 44 03; Tynystanov 104/38; ☎ Tue-Fri)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Kyrgyzstan isn't exactly full of festivals. The most exciting are the **horse games** at the end of July and August (notably Independence Day, 31 August) at Bishkek, Cholpon-Ata, Karakol and the *jailoos* around Song-Köl and Kochkor. Gruelling horse races are also held during the **At Chabyshev festival** (p310) in Barskoön in early November. NoviNomad in Bishkek (p282) and the nearest CBT can offer details.

During the recently revived **Nooruz** (21 March) celebrations expect to see sporting events, traditional games, music festivals and street fairs particularly around Osh and Jalal-Abad.

The **Birds of Prey Festival** (p312), held early August in Bokonbayevo, offers an excellent opportunity to see eagle hunters and falcons compete.

HOLIDAYS

See p449 for information on the Muslim public holidays of Ramadan and Eid festivals.

1 January New Year's Day.

7 January Russian Orthodox Christmas.

23 February Army Day.

8 March International Women's Day.

21 March Nooruz.

24 March Anniversary of the March Revolution.

1 May International Labour Day.

5 May Constitution Day.

9 May WWII Victory Day.

31 August Independence Day.

7 November Anniversary of the October Revolution.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Celestial Mountains Tour Company (www.celestial.com.kg) An exhaustive resource on all things Kyrgyz.

Community Based Tourism (www.cbtkyrgyzstan.kg) Contact details and prices for its services.

Helvetas (www.helvetas.kg) General info, Altyn Kol handicrafts and Shepherd's Life.

Kyrgyzstan Info (www.kirgistan.info) Travel info to off-the-beaten-track places in northern Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan.Org (www.kyrgyzstan.org) Current events, travel advice, visa regulations, events links.

Times of Central Asia (www.timesca-europe.com) Current events.

MAPS

Geoid in Bishkek (p279) has a Kyrgyzstan country map (Cyrillic and English), an interesting Silk Road of Kyrgyzstan map, trekking route maps and 1:200,000 Soviet topographic maps of various parts of Kyrgyzstan. Most maps are in Russian.

Trekking maps available at the agency:

Ala-Archa (1:50,000) Routes up to Ak-Say Glacier and the ski base, in English.

Cherez Talasskii Khrebet k Ozeru Sary-Chelek

(1:200,000) From Leninopol to Sary-Chelek over the Talas mountains.

Kirgizskii Khrebet (1:200,000) Topographical map, covering the Kyrgyzsky Mountains south of Bishkek. There's also a separate 1:150,000 schematic map showing peaks in the same region.

Ozero Issyk-Kul (1:200,000) Topographical map, covering trekking routes to Kazakhstan via the Chong-Kemin Valley.

Sokh (1:200,000) Alay Mountains.

South-East Issyk-Köl Lake Coast (1:100,000) Trekking routes around Karakol, including the Jeti-Öghüz Valley, Altyn Arashan and Ala-Köl.

Tsentralniy Tyan-Shan (1:150,000) Schematic map of Inylchek Glacier and around.

MONEY

The Kyrgyz som is divided into 100 tiyin. Notes come in 1000, 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10, five and one som denominations. Banks and licensed moneychanger booths (marked *obmen balyot*) exchange US dollars provided the notes are unblemished in near-mint condition and, if possible, post 2001. There are

ATMs in Bishkek, Jalal-Abad and Osh that dispense both US dollars and som. Travellers cheques can be cashed in these places and in Karakol (3% commission). Most prices in this chapter are listed in som apart from higher-priced items which, as is the custom in Kyrgyzstan, are listed in US dollars although a few businesses in the hospitality industry fix their prices in euros. There is no black market for currency transactions and exchange rates at the time of research were as follows:

| Country | Unit | = | Som |
|-------------|-------|---|-------|
| Australia | A\$1 | = | 30.17 |
| Canada | C\$ | = | 34.20 |
| China | Y1 | = | 4.94 |
| euro zone | €1 | = | 50.73 |
| Kazakhstan | 10T | = | 3.03 |
| New Zealand | NZ\$1 | = | 26.13 |
| Russia | R1 | = | 1.47 |
| Switzerland | 1Sfr | = | 32.08 |
| Tajikistan | 1TJS | = | 12.07 |
| UK | £1 | = | 74.90 |
| USA | US\$1 | = | 38.77 |
| Uzbekistan | 100\$ | = | 3.14 |

If you need to wire money, MoneyGram has services at main post offices and Western Union works through most banks.

POST

An airmail postcard costs 25som and a 20g letter costs 30som to all countries. Parcels are shipped at US\$11 per kilogram and airmail is often less expensive than sea freight.

DHL (www.dhl.kg) has offices in Bishkek and Osh and charges US\$92 to send 1kg to North America. **FedEx** (www.fedex.com) has an office in Bishkek. A 1kg box to North America costs US\$75.

REGISTRATION

Foreigners from 28 countries, including the US, UK, Australia, Canada, Israel and most European countries no longer need to register with OVIR (Office of Visas and Registrations; UPVR in Kyrgyzstan). Other countries (one notable example is Dutch citizens) need to register within three days of arriving in Kyrgyzstan.

SHOPPING

Small pottery figurines shaped as bread sellers, musicians, and 'white beards' are for sale everywhere but most are made at the Arts Faculty

in Osh. Hats are also for sale everywhere but most are factory-made in Toktogul. The most popular buys are *shyrdaks* (p276).

Other souvenirs include miniature yurts and embroidered bags, chess sets featuring Manas and company, horse whips, *kymys* shakers, leather boxes, felt slippers and musical instruments such as the Kyrgyz mouth harp.

TELEPHONE

International telephone rates are 15som per minute to Central Asia and 25som per minute to other countries. Domestic calls cost about 7som per minute and local calls 1som per minute. Some older telephones require you to dial 3 after the person picks up.

To make an international call, dial ☎ 00 plus the international code of the country you wish to call.

To make an intercity call, dial ☎ 0 plus the city code.

To call a mobile (either Bitel or Katel) dial ☎ 0 first plus the number, except for Bitel 312 mobile numbers from a land line in which case you do not dial ☎ 0.

Internet phone calls cost as little as 5som per minute to the USA.

To send a fax, Telecom offices charge around US\$5 a page. You are better off scanning it at an internet café and sending an email.

If you have a GSM mobile phone, you can buy a SIM card from **MobiCard** (☎ 312-60 02 22) and scratchcards in units of 200, 400 and 1000.

Sim cards are available from Bitel and Mega Com for 120som. No registration is required. Bitel has the better coverage.

VISAS

Kyrgyzstan is the easiest of the Central Asian republics for which to get a visa. Kyrgyz embassies issue 30-day tourist visas, with fixed dates, to 28 nationalities (see Registration, opposite, or visit www.kyrgyzembassy.org) without letters of support. These nationalities can also obtain a visa on arrival at Bishkek's Manas International Airport (US\$35) although not at land borders.

Most nationalities from the former Soviet bloc, as well as Japanese, Turks and Kazakhs do not need visas.

If there is no Kyrgyz embassy in your country, go through a Kazakh embassy instead, although a letter of invitation regardless of

nationality is then required. Central Asian travel agencies (p457) can provide these for US\$20 to US\$30.

It's illegal to enter Kyrgyzstan except at a designated border crossing, which makes cross-border treks (eg Almaty to Issyk-Köl) technically illegal. You'll need a travel agency to help smooth over these problems if you intend to take these treks.

Travel Permits

Certain sensitive border areas such as the Khan Tengri region and Alay Valley require a military border permit (*propusk pa granzona*; US\$10), which trekking agencies can arrange in about 10 days.

Visa Extensions

A 30-day visa extension is easy to get from OVIR offices in Bishkek (p282), Karakol (p302), Osh (p336) and Naryn. These cost 400som to 600som and are processed the same day.

Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Kyrgyzstan, see p345.

China This embassy hasn't realised the Cultural Revolution is over and won't issue tourist visas without an invitation from a Xinjiang tourist agency. ITMC Tian Shan (p284) and Celestial Mountains (p282) can get an invitation in a week (US\$50). Thirty-day visas cost US\$50 for Americans, US\$30 for others and take a week to issue (urgent service: three days, twice the price).

India Accepts visa applications 2pm to 4pm Mon to Fri. A standard six-month tourist visa cost 1835som for US citizens, 1105som for other nationalities. Two photos are necessary. Visas take three to five days to issue.

Iran Transit visas of 10 days' duration are issued in one week. You need a letter of invitation for a tourist visa.

Kazakhstan Get to the embassy early and put your name on the list to get inside. Fees need to be paid at the Kazkommertsbank (p281). For a transit visa bring your ticket out of Kazakhstan (and copy), the visa for the country being visited next (and copy), one photo, a photocopy of your passport and Kyrgyz visa; takes five/three days (US\$20/35).

Russia Visas are only available from the consular office (55 Manas; open 9am till noon and 2.30 till 3.30pm Monday, Tuesday & Thursday), not the embassy. You'll need a letter of invitation and four passport photos. Transit visas cost US\$16/32 in a week/day and you'll need tickets in and out of Russia. Fees are paid at the Kairat bank, four blocks north.

Tajikistan Thirty-day visas were available in four working days (US\$50 plus 50som). Bring photo, passport, a photocopy of passport and a letter of invitation, although at the time

of research this was not always required. The friendly Tajik ambassador often helps with the application form.

Uzbekistan You need to get a Russian speaker to phone the embassy and put your name on the list. Arrive by 10am; take along one photo, passport, a photocopy of passport, the letter of invitation and a Russian translator. Bishkek tour agencies (such as Novinomad and Kyrgyz Concept) provide translators (US\$20), although it may be worth negotiating a price with a student from the American University. Tourist visas (US\$102 for US citizens, US\$72 for other nationalities) issued on the same day at 3pm; pay when you get it.

TRANSPORT IN KYRGYZSTAN

GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Kyrgyzstan

Remote border posts, for example at Karkara and along the Pamir Hwy, from Tajikistan may not stamp your visa with an entry stamp but you should insist that this is done, otherwise you'll have problems. Generally, entering the country presents no difficulties.

Air

Bishkek's Manas airport is the main international hub although there are also flights to Moscow, Ürümqi and Dushanbe from Osh. The national carrier, Air Company Kyrgyzstan (AC Kyrgyzstan) was formerly Alтын Air.

From Bishkek, Central Asian destinations include Tashkent (US\$100, with Uzbekistan Airways, AC Kyrgyzstan), Ürümqi (US\$210, Kyrgyzstan Air, China Southern, Esen Air) and Dushanbe (US\$150, Tajik Air, AC Kyrgyzstan).

One-way/return fares for Russia include Yekaterinburg (US\$230/460, AC Kyrgyzstan, twice weekly), Novosibirsk (US\$200/400, AC Kyrgyzstan, thrice weekly) and Moscow (US\$250/400, Aeroflot, AC Kyrgyzstan, Itek Air, daily).

Other international destinations reached directly from Bishkek are limited to Dubai (US\$300/600, AC Kyrgyzstan, once weekly), İstanbul (US\$428/560, Turkish Airlines, once weekly) and London (US\$675/852, British Airways, four times weekly).

Between June and September AC Kyrgyzstan also has a weekly flight to Hanover and Frankfurt for US\$450/900 one way/return.

Because flight choice is limited, many choose to fly to Tashkent (p266), Almaty (p183) or Ürümqi (China) and connect from there. A transit visa will be required if you plan to leave these airports. Note that it's only three hours by road between Almaty and Kyrgyzstan and KLM runs a free Bishkek–Almaty ground shuttle service for their customers, leaving Bishkek in front of the Dostuk Hotel on the day of flights at 6pm (transit visa required).

A similar Lufthansa bus departs at 7pm from Grand Hyatt. It's free if you buy your ticket in Bishkek, otherwise it costs US\$25. The bus leaves Almaty airport at 12.30am, arriving in Bishkek at 3.30am.

For more details on airline offices in Bishkek, see p289. The US\$10 international departure tax and 4% government tax is included in the ticket price.

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

For more on the complicated jigsaw borders of the Fergana Valley, see p471. One thing to note is that transport along Kyrgyzstan's southern arm from Osh to Batken passes through the Uzbek enclave of Sokh so you'll need to get an Uzbek visa or hire a taxi to take you on a dirt road detour around the enclave.

To/From China

Of the two land crossings from China the 3752m **Torugart Pass** (p325) is the more complicated and expensive, requiring pricey, pre-arranged Chinese transport.

The newer and easier border crossing is the **Irkeshtam Pass** (p340) linking Kashgar to Osh and the Fergana Valley. It has none of the restrictions of the Torugart and you can take taxis, hitch on trucks or even cycle.

See Passing the Pass (opposite) for general tips on these borders.

To/From Kazakhstan

Minibuses go directly from Bishkek to Almaty (250som, 4½ hours) every hour or two, as do private cars (350som per seat). There is a passport check at the border by the Chuy River and you will need a Kazakh visa.

A back-door route into Kazakhstan is possible through the Karkara Valley. There's no through transport so you'll have to hire a taxi or hitch part of the way. See p299 for details.

TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

The mountain borders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China have become destinations within themselves. A cathedral of peaks, head-spinning altitudes and mythically remote roads guarantee that these are not your usual ho-hum, forgettable border posts. To ensure a hassle free crossing there are some things worth bearing in mind.

- Avoid crossing a pass on any day that might even conceivably be construed as a holiday on either side, or in Russia, as the border will probably be closed.
- Attempting to cross on a Friday is tricky, as if the border is temporarily closed for snow or some other reason you won't be able to re-try for another three days. Try to arrive at the border as early as possible as things tend to grind to a halt at lunchtime.
- Be aware of time-zone differences. In summer (roughly April to September) China (ie Beijing) time is two hours later than Kyrgyzstan time, and in winter three hours later.
- Check the weather. Have your paperwork right.
- For high-altitude passes be aware that at the beginning and end of the season you really need a 4WD not a little Toyota minivan. Also remember that there is little reliable petrol, oil or parts along the way.

There is a new 96km 4WD road from near Cholpon-Ata over to Chong-Kemin Valley and beyond to Almaty but you need a 4WD for this rough route and as there's no border control, you'll have headaches getting a visa stamp.

Trains run four times a week from Bishkek to Almaty and on to Moscow (train 17, 4021som, Monday and Thursday; train 27, 3900som, Wednesday and Saturday).

To/From Tajikistan

The main crossing for travellers is at the Bor Döbo checkpoint on the Pamir Hwy, between Murgab district and Sary Tash. To travel on the Pamir Hwy a GBAO permit that says 'Murgab district' is required. Another remote crossing leads southwest from the Pamir Alay Valley into the Garm Valley and on to Dushanbe, although this is currently closed to foreigners.

From the Fergana Valley it's possible to cross from Batken to Isfara (not Isfana) in Tajikistan.

To/From Uzbekistan

From Bishkek buses go from the west bus station to Tashkent three times a day between 6pm and 9pm for about 285som; however, at the time of research these were only going as far as the Kazakh–Uzbek border at Cherny-aevka, from where you had to take a minibus

a few kilometres into Tashkent. These buses run through Kazakhstan and require a Kazakh transit visa, which makes flying a competitive option.

From Jalal-Abad take a taxi or minibus (20som) to Khanabad (formerly Sovietabad) and cross by foot. Note that the Kara-Suu border crossing is not open.

From Osh take a taxi (50som) or minibus (Nos 107, 113, 136, 137 or 138, 5som) to Dustlyk/Dostyk and then get a seat in a shared taxi to Andijon. Osh Guesthouse in Osh (p338) can help arrange a car direct to Tashkent or Andijon.

It is also possible to travel to/from Tashkent by rail but all pass through Kazakhstan necessitating a Kazakh visa.

See p468 for more on travelling around the region.

GETTING AROUND

Travelling around Kyrgyzstan is generally quite straightforward. The bus system is slowly unravelling and so for most trips your best bet is the shared taxis or marshrutka (minibuses), which wait for passengers at most bus stations.

Shared taxis also act as private taxis if you are willing to pay for all four seats and most travel agencies also arrange private cars.

For airlines flying domestic routes between Bishkek, Osh and Jalal-Abad, see p289.

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