

# Cycling Kyrgyzstan

*Where the asphalt ends, the adventure begins*



**PRACTICAL TIPS, ROUTES, HISTORY, AND CULTURE TO  
EXPLORE KYRGYZSTAN AT YOUR OWN PACE**



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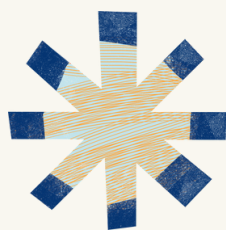
# Welcome to Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan. A country that, for many, sounds distant, remote, almost a mystery. We arrived with more questions than certainties, and returned with unforgettable landscapes, roads that seem invented, and a hospitality that left a mark on us.

This guide is born from our experience traveling through Kyrgyzstan by bicycle, but it is meant for anyone curious who wants to explore the country in an authentic and personal way—whether by pedaling, walking, or driving.

Here you'll find practical tips on gear, visas, communications, and route planning. We also share stories from the road, cultural insights to understand where you're riding, and an honest look at what works (and what doesn't) when you set out to cross a country where 90% of the land is mountains.

This is not a definitive guide. It's an invitation to discover Kyrgyzstan with an open mind, warm clothing, and a willingness to be surprised. Because, as we learned, every valley holds a story and every climb, a reward.



A cyclist wearing a dark jacket and helmet is riding a gravel bike with panniers on a dirt road. The background features a large, rocky mountain range with green vegetation. In the top right corner, there is a graphic element consisting of a blue starburst shape on a yellow and orange gradient background.

# 1. Before traveling

**Everything you need to know before shifting into first gear: visas, gear, connectivity, accommodation, and budget. Key tips to get well prepared before you ride.**



discover

# Visas

Before entering Kyrgyzstan, as with any other country, you should check whether you need a visa depending on your nationality. Most European citizens do not need a prior visa and receive a free 60-day permit upon arrival. On the other hand, citizens of countries such as Uruguay must apply for an e-visa.

The tourist e-visa for Kyrgyzstan can be for 30 or 60 days and costs approximately US\$41 to US\$51, depending on the duration. It is easily processed through the official website of the Kyrgyz government.

In some cases (like ours), a Letter of Invitation (LOI) is required in order to apply for the visa. We hired that service through the agency [Global Connect Uzbekistan](#), which was fast and reliable, but it cost us US\$110.





# The gear

The necessary gear will depend on the time of year. The best season to travel is between May and September. We were there from May 23 to July 18, and experienced very diverse weather: extreme heat in low areas like Bishkek (up to 37°C), warm days and cool nights in Issyk Kul, and cold with rain in the Tian Shan mountains.

We brought layered clothing: breathable short-sleeve shirts, long-sleeve tops with sun protection, windbreakers, long and short pants, and waterproof gear. If you plan to cross rivers, as on some routes in the Tian Shan, it's recommended to bring waterproof socks and water-friendly footwear (like Crocs).

For sleeping, a -5°C sleeping bag along with insulating mats was sufficient.

The country is passable with both bikepacking setups and traditional panniers. For routes like the Tian Shan, a bike with suspension and mountain tires may be more comfortable, but it's also possible with touring bicycles. We used Fuji Touring bikes with 42 mm tires without any issues.





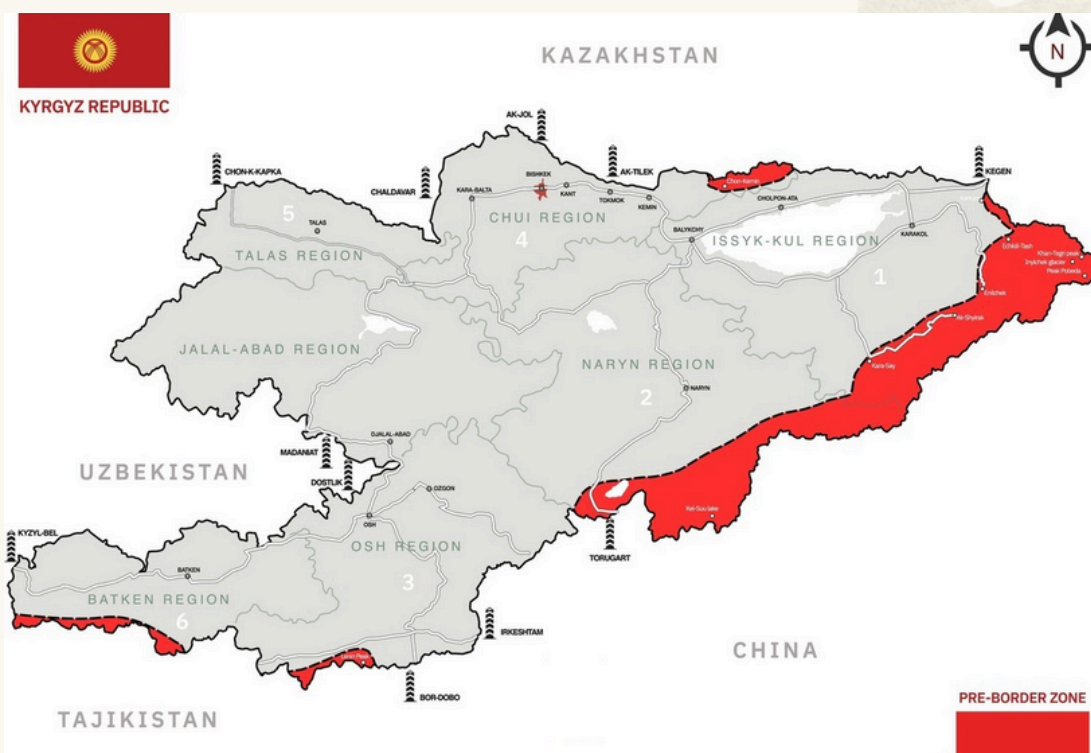
# CBT (Community-Based Tourism) y permisos

CBT is a community-based tourism network present in many regions. It offers homestay accommodations, excursions, traditional meals, and logistics in rural or mountainous areas. It has offices in Karakol, Kochkor, Naryn, Osh, among others.

You can check the regional office websites here:

- [CBT Karakol](#)
- [CBT Naryn](#)
- [Página principal de CBT Kyrgyzstan](#)

Some areas require special permits, especially in regions bordering China, Kazakhstan, or Tajikistan. CBT can provide information and help you obtain them. As of July 2025, these are the areas where permits are required:





# Communication



Mobile coverage is good in cities and large towns, but almost nonexistent in mountainous areas. We used the company Mega, and it worked quite well. We bought a SIM card with 100 GB for 30 days for 1,195 KGS (about 12 euros).

**Important:** your phone must be registered in the Kyrgyz IMEI system within 30 days of purchasing the SIM card. Otherwise, it will be blocked. Since registration can be cumbersome (it requires a local bank account), here are three options:

- A.** If you're traveling for less than 30 days, you won't have any problems.
- B.** If you're traveling as a couple or group, you can take turns using the SIM with a hotspot.
- C.** Using roaming or an eSIM (like Holafly) avoids this issue and improves coverage. If you're interested in this option, with our code DEACULLA you get a 5% discount on your total purchase. [Click here for the link.](#)



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# Planning



A key tool is Komoot, ideal for viewing routes, gradients, road types, and camping spots. Other useful resources:

- [Tian Shan Traverse en Bikepacking.com](https://www.tianshantraverse.com/)
- [Bikepacking Kyrgyzstan](https://www.bikepackingkyrgyzstan.com/)
- [iOverlander](https://www.iOverlander.com/): to find campsites, shops, water, warnings, etc.
- [Mapy.cz](https://www.mapy.cz/): offline maps with a good level of detail
- [Grupos de WhatsApp](https://www.whatsapp.com/): there are several active groups of cycle travelers, very useful for real-time advice.

# Budget and Shopping



## Accommodation

Guesthouses are the most common option, and Booking.com is the most used platform, although it is often cheaper to negotiate directly upon arrival. Some examples:

- Bishkek: entire apartment (outside the city center), USD 200/7 days
- Barksoon: yurt, shared bathroom, 700 KGS per night
- Naryn: studio with kitchen and bathroom, 1,400 KGS
- Osh: Halal hostel, 1,500 KGS per room

In general, if you stay for several days, it's possible to get a discount. On the other hand, 90% of the time while cycling, our accommodation is our tent. Wild camping is very easy in Kyrgyzstan.





## Stores and Shopping

In large cities, there are usually supermarkets like Globus, where you can find a wide variety of processed products, fruits and vegetables, and cereals. As you move into more rural areas, stores tend to be much smaller and the selection much more limited, so it's a good idea to stock up in the larger towns to be well prepared.

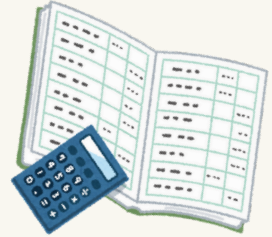
Even so, you can always find something: noodles, sweets, some potatoes and onions, cookies, eggs sometimes, etc. Product prices are usually low.



## Budget

In one month, we spent USD 520 for two people, divided as follows:

- **Food:** USD 324
- **Accommodation:** USD 120
- **Meals in restaurants, etc.:** USD 56
- **Bicycle maintenance (brakes and one tire):** USD 20



This does not include the visa and the documents required to obtain it.

**Extra tip:** We used [Toshl](#) to track our expenses; it's an easy-to-use and free app.



# 2. Kyrgyzstan in Context



**A glimpse into the soul of the country: history, culture, and customs that will help you understand what you see along the way. From the traces of the Silk Road to modern nomadic life, this section will give you the keys to better read the human and natural landscape of Kyrgyzstan.**

# A Little Bit of History

To better understand where we are

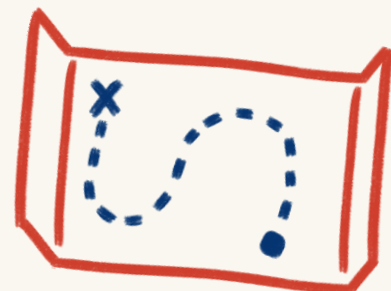




Kyrgyzstan is a young country with very, very ancient roots. For centuries, these mountains and valleys were home to nomadic peoples who moved with their yurts and livestock, following the rhythm of the seasons. The territory was part of the legendary Silk Road, so merchants, ideas, religions, and empires all passed through here. Mongols, Persians, Turks... all left their mark.



Later, in the 19th century, the region was absorbed by the Russian Empire, and in 1936 it became a republic within the Soviet Union. This brought enormous changes: cities were founded, Russian was imposed as the official language, land was collectivized, and the nomadic lifestyle was suppressed. Even so, many traditional customs survived, partly in secret, partly adapted to the new times.



With the fall of the USSR in 1991, Kyrgyzstan gained independence, and since then it has been on a path of reinvention. There have been revolutions, economic crises, several presidents, and many challenges. But there has also been a strong revival of cultural pride: Kyrgyz has regained prominence as a language, traditional celebrations have been revived, and in recent years, nature and cultural tourism have grown significantly.

Today, Kyrgyzstan is a safe country to travel in, with hospitable people who will welcome you with tea, bread, and probably a smile. There is a marked contrast between urban areas (like Bishkek, modern and Soviet at the same time) and the rural world, where many families still live according to the pastoral calendar. That mix of what was, what is, and what is coming can be felt on every curve of the road.



# Typical Things You'll Find

- 🐎 **Horse meat:** one of the most valued foods in Kyrgyz cuisine. It is eaten dried, boiled, as sausage (kazy), or in soups. It may be surprising, but it's very common.
- 🧀 **Kurut:** salty balls of dried fermented milk. Hard as rocks and with a strong flavor. Sometimes they seem more like a snack for hikers than a meal, but locals love them.
- 🥛 **Kumis:** fermented mare's milk. Sour, alcoholic, foamy... and quite an experience. If you're offered some, it's best to try it (even just a sip). It's part of the hospitality ritual.
- 🍵 **Chay (tea):** drunk at any time, with or without food, alone or with bread. Usually strong black tea, served in small cups. It's a way of welcoming guests and always appreciated.
- 🍞 **Lepyoshka:** round bread, baked in a clay oven (tandoor). Eaten with every meal. It is never thrown away or placed upside down; it is considered almost sacred.

Kurut drying in the sun



**We are invited to eat  
horse meat**



- 🍷 **Samsa:** baked pastries, usually filled with lamb or beef and onion. The best ones are bought from street stalls, greasy and hot.
- 🍛 **Plov:** fried rice with meat, carrot, and sometimes raisins or chickpeas. More typical in the south (near Uzbekistan), but found throughout the country.
- 🐏 **Sheep and yurts:** pastoral life is still very present, especially in summer. You'll see many sheep, goats, horses... and families living in yurts, the traditional felt houses.
- 🏔️ **Mountains, lakes, and impossible roads:** 90% of the country is mountainous. That means spectacular landscapes, high passes, dirt roads, and plenty of solitude.
- 🤝 **Nomadic hospitality:** if you're invited to a yurt, to eat, or to drink чай, accept. Sharing what they have is part of their culture, and the gesture matters more than the feast.

# Languages in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan, two languages are mainly spoken: Kyrgyz and Russian. Kyrgyz is the national language, of Turkic roots, and is widely used in rural areas. Russian, on the other hand, is co-official and is used more in cities and in public administration.

Although English is not widely spoken outside urban centers, you will always find gestures, smiles, or a translation app to help you.

Knowing some key words in Kyrgyz or Russian can open many doors (and hearts!). Here's a list of the basics for your trip:

<b>English</b>	<b>Kirguiz</b>	<b>Russian</b>
Hello	Салам (Salam)	Привет (Privet)
Thanks	Рахмат (Rakhmat)	Спасибо (Spasiba)
Yes	Ооба (Oba)	Да (Da)
No	Жок (Jok)	Нет (Nyet)
Water	Суу (Suu)	Вода (Voda)
Food	Тамак (Tamak)	Еда (Yeda)
Tea	Чай (Chay)	Чай (Chay)
Milk	Сүт (Süt)	Молоко (Moloko)
Bread	Нан (Nan)	Хлеб (Khleb)
Shop	Дүкөн (Dükön)	Магазин (Magazin)
Market	Базар (Bazar)	Базар (Bazar)
Bicycle	Велосипед (Velosiped)	Велосипед (Velosiped)
Route	Жол (Zhol)	Дорога (Doroga)
Mountain	Тоо (Too)	Гора (Gora)
I don't understand	Түшүнбөйм (Tüshünböym)	Я не понимаю (Ya ne ponimayu)



# 3. Our Route

**The heart of the cycling journey: stories and sensations of riding through Kyrgyzstan. From departing Bishkek to the high mountain passes, we share the route, the challenges, and the beauty we encountered along the way.**

# Bishkek to Balykchy

It's a very busy route with no major attractions. The section between Kemin and Balikchy is a traffic nightmare with no shoulder, making it very dangerous. One option if you arrive in Bishkek and want to go to Issyk Kul is to take the train, which takes about 5 hours and costs between 150 and 300 KGS. The only drawback is that it operates from mid-June to the end of August, which is why we had to cycle.



Another option would have been to take a Marshrutka, which is the public transport in the country, but we didn't feel like dealing with the hassle of disassembling the bikes and fitting them into one of these small vans. However, many people do it, and they usually don't have any problems.

As a last option, you could take a taxi. These are more expensive, but the price can be negotiated.



# Issyk-kul

From Balykchy, we cycled along the south shore of Issyk Kul Lake. This road is under construction, and as we approached the eastern end, it got progressively worse. Still, the construction seems to be moving quickly, so it will soon be a major highway. There isn't much traffic in this section, but you still need to stay alert, as Kyrgyz drivers are not the most considerate toward cyclists.

On this southern stretch of the lake, there's a detour from the main road that's worth taking: the Aksay Canyon route. This route runs along the shore on gravel paths and sometimes sand, offering a peaceful way to enjoy the lake. Wild camping in this area is a true delight.



I'm leaving you here with the link to our [🔗 \*\*route on Komoot\*\*](#) and the places where we camped on [🔗 \*\*Polar Steps\*\*](#). These links cover our entire journey through Kyrgyzstan..

# Tian Shan

The Tian Shan mountains offer many ways to approach them. We decided to start in Barksoon and from there take the Arabel Pass (3,819 m) and then descend through the Burkhan River valley toward Naryn.

We divided the climb into two stages: the first was 27 km with a 910 m ascent, and the second also 910 m but over 16 km. The gradients were much steeper near the end of the pass, before opening up onto the Arabel Plateau.

The exit from the plateau toward the river is a very steep 1 km descent with slopes of 16%. After this kilometer, the descent becomes gentler with some climbs along a path that varies between rocky and muddy depending on the spot. For these stages, we expected the route to be easier, but three days of rain made progress much slower than we had anticipated.





The views along the valley are very beautiful, with snow-capped peaks and green mountains inhabited by marmots and small birds. River crossings are frequent but usually at a relatively low level. Still, for better preparation, it's a good idea to plan large river crossings in the mornings, when water levels are typically lower.

Speaking of water, getting drinking water is usually easy, as there are many streams coming directly from the mountains. However, it's recommended to filter the water before consuming it, as livestock and other animals can contaminate these small streams.

Regarding food, you need to plan that during the days you're in the valley there will be absolutely nothing—just a few yurts along the way, but no shops or places to get supplies. So you should carry enough food for the days you plan to be in the valley. We brought food for six days and had no issues. The first store you'll find if heading toward Naryn is in a small village called Tamdy-Suu.

The route between Tamdy-Suu and Tash-Bashat is very beautiful, transitioning from a narrow canyon between mountains to an open region with snow-capped peaks in the background.

# From Naryn to Osh

Just as we were about to leave Naryn, we noticed that Seba's tire was damaged. In Naryn we couldn't find a solution, so we decided to keep going as far as we could and, if it got worse, hitchhike to Kazarman or Jalal-Abad to make our way toward Osh.



We did the first mountain pass, which is very beautiful, and before reaching Kazarman we ran into some friends from France traveling in a van, and they gave us a ride to Osh. We were very lucky to meet them just when we needed transport to the city.

# Osh - Sary-Tash - Pamir Highway

Finally, we resumed our route from Osh toward the Tajikistan border. We were a bit short on time, so we took the main road directly—completely paved but with some truck traffic heading toward the Chinese border.

This section is mostly a gentle climb with two mountain passes, the second one—just before Sary-Tash—quite tough and already at high altitude.



In Gulcha, we stopped for a day and took advantage of the fairly well-stocked bazaar to prepare for entering Tajikistan, where we planned to explore the Bartang Valley. There we found nuts, dried and fresh fruit, vegetables, and some other long-lasting supplies for the route.

A scenic landscape of rolling green hills. In the foreground, a person on a motorcycle is riding away on a dirt path. The path is scattered with rocks. In the middle ground, there is a wooden bridge with a metal railing. The background shows more green hills under a clear sky. A large, stylized green graphic element is visible in the top right corner.

# 4. Recommended Content

**A glimpse into the soul of the country: history, culture, and customs that will help you understand what you see along the way. From the traces of the Silk Road to modern nomadic life, this section will give you the keys to better read the human and natural landscape of Kyrgyzstan.**

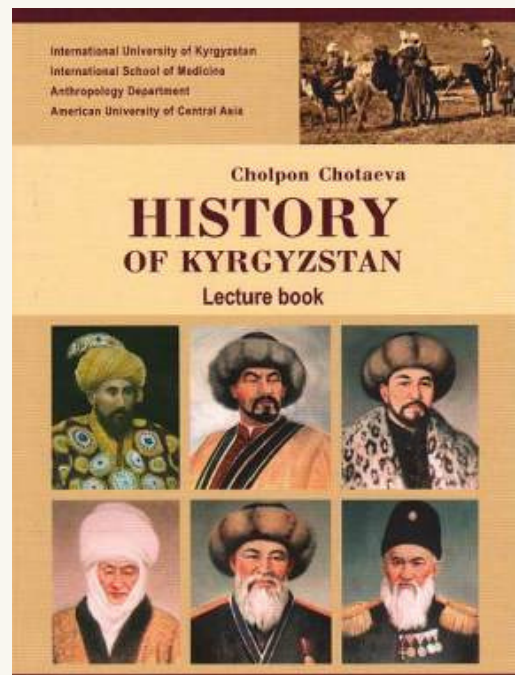
# Readings

## History of Kyrgyzstan – Cholpon Chotaeva (2016)

An excellent summary of Kyrgyzstan's history, from its nomadic origins to the post-Soviet era. Written by a local historian, this book is ideal for understanding the cultural, political, and social context of the country. Accessible, clear, and useful both for the curious and for travelers who want to go beyond the landscapes.

📁 In English | Academic focus but very readable –

[🔗 Download](#)



## Yamila – Chinguiz Aitmatov

A literary gem. This short novel by Kyrgyzstan's most renowned author tells a love story during World War II, set in the Kyrgyz countryside. It's poetic, simple, and powerful. Reading Yamila is a way to feel the sensitivity and landscape of Kyrgyzstan from within.

📁 In Spanish | Perfect for reading during the trip, short and very evocative – [🔗 Download](#)



# Audiovisual

## Somewhere on Earth: Kyrgyzstan - Free Documentary (YouTube)

A light, visually engaging, and well-made documentary. It shows the lives of various people in different regions of the country, from shepherds to musicians. It gives you a human and natural perspective.

[Watch on YouTube](#)



## DW Documentary - "Women Take the Reins in Kyrgyz Villages"

A documentary that follows Airkairenza Kushtarbek and her experience as a mother and worker in a rural village, while her husband works far away in Russia. A story that reflects the demographic and social changes many families in Kyrgyzstan face today.

[Watch on YouTube](#)

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