

KIRGIZIA & UZBEKISTAN

A Silk Road photo journey!

No set departure

Price 2018: 4.975USD

With Ed Michels as leader



Kirgizia is located in the central part of Central Asia and represents one of the most interesting mountain areas of our planet, the Central Tien-Shan Mountains, located on the northern flanks of the Himalaya mountain range. Some of its mountains reach over 7000 meters (Pobeda 7439m) at the north-eastern edge of the country and belong to the highest in the world. During this trip we will make a tour around some of its most fantastic nature reserves coming across many dazzling plants and other wildlife. This trip is assured for fantastic mountain scenery, an overwhelming flora & fauna, splendid birding, and large numbers of butterflies all in the kingdom of one of the most endangered animals on this planet, the Snow Leopard. Not unimportantly this tour offers fantastic opportunities for photography.

On this epic journey you will have the support of an experienced wildlife and landscape photographer, who will teach and guide everyone on its individual level of performance. On the end of the trip, you'll have an improved set of tools with a direct result in your pictures. In the field he will coach each person to gain some more techniques or improve his/hers approach to a subject. If you are a real 'beginner', you go home with a set of pictures, you would not have dreamed about, and the more advanced photographers will notice that their level is either wise being deepened or broadened. In both cases, your photo book of this trip will surprise you and your acquaintances!

For the non-photographers this is a trip you will keep with you for the rest of your life. There is so much to see and discover beautiful scenery, gorgeous flowers, attractive birds, bright butterflies and exquisite dragonflies. On the moments that the photographers take more time for their best shot, there will be an alternative program available.

Uzbekistan is a country steeped in ancient history. In ancient times it was a rich region of splendid cities and cultures based along the Great Silk Route to China – a true crossroads between east and west. The country is steeped in fabled historical sites in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara where ancient civilisations have travelled and fought over possession of central Asia for thousands of years. Superbly intact and incredibly beautiful, extravagant ancient architecture is everywhere in our midst. There is also a short-list of very special birds to be found. Several species at the western edge of their range in Asia such as Asian Paradise Flycatcher, Long-tailed Shrike, Rufous-naped Tit and Pied Bushchat mix with local specialties such as Pygmy Cormorant, White-tailed Lapwing, Ménériés's Warbler, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater,

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THE LEADING BIRD TOUR OPERATOR FOR CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA

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Hume's Lark, Yellow-breasted Tit, Persian Nuthatch, Finsch's and Variable Wheatears, White-throated Robin, Eastern Orphean Warbler and Clamorous Reed-Warbler. At the top of the "want-list" is the enigmatic and curious Pander's Ground Jay, easily found in the stony deserts of Kyzyl-Kum.

European birders have been enjoying these stable countries and their fantastic birds and history ever since they gained independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The best birding sites are well established and there is an excellent network of local guides. RBT operated its first and highly successful tour in 2007. We are sure that participants will be delighted with this extraordinary central Asian experience.

August 30-31, Day 1-2: To Bishkek

Clients depart from home towards the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. Clients need to be in the hotel in Bishkek before August 31 – 4pm. We schedule for this time the introductory meeting with your tour leader. This will give your leader the chance to introduce you with your fellow participants, give you the latest information on this trip and to tell you more about the daily routines. The meeting is followed by a presentation on macro photography. All will take place in our hotel in Bishkek. If you like to come in earlier please contact the RBT office which will gladly help with extra hotel bookings.

NIGHTS: Day 1, on aircraft.
Day 2, Garden Hotel****, Bishkek.

September 01, Day 3: Ala Archa: work shop macro photography

After an early morning departure we set sails towards the splendid Ala Archa National Park, located only 40km south of Bishkek. On this day we schedule a field workshop in macro photography. The green valley of Ala Archa is plentiful with meadows and brooks harboring a great diversity of butterflies, dragonflies and other insects giving us enough opportunities for macro photography. The evening before the workshop your leader will hold a presentation on macro photography. Topics such as field of depth, equipment, perspectives, and so on are described. Large coniferous trees make suitable habitat for Greenish Warbler, Hume's Warbler, Rufous-naped Tit and Azure Tits. Along the wild streaming river we go after the finest songster of the region, the Blue Whistling Thrush! Next to birds, gorgeous butterflies fly around, Mountain Apollo, Banded Apollo, Clouded Apollo is three of the seven species of Apollo we can encounter in the park. In the evening we return to our lovely tourist hotel and discuss the result while enjoying a cold drink.

NIGHT: Garden Hotel****, Bishkek.

September 02, Day 4: To Karakol

We start our venture with a long drive further east towards the largest city in eastern Kyrgyzstan, located close to the border with China. We arrive in this former Russian

military outpost, now called Karakol, in the evening. Today we will have our first looks over the Issyk Kol Lake. Issyk Kol is the second largest saline lake in the world and although it is surrounded by snowcapped mountains the lake never freezes, hence its name 'hot lake' in the Kyrgyz language. Before reaching the lake we stop in some very interesting spectacular dry mountains which are perfect for some landscape photography as they contrast heavily with the nearby river with its green vegetation. In the first city at the Issyk Kol Lake we meet local salespeople selling dried fish, showcased beautifully on a wooden rack. In the early evening we arrive in amazing guesthouse in Karakol which will be our home for the coming three nights.

NIGHT: Greenyard guesthouse, Karakol.

September 03, Day 5: Chon Ashuu

Today we drive up to great heights with an excursion to the Chon Ashuu pass which is the highest pass we visit during this tour in Kyrgyzstan. With a dazzling 3822 meters we go today way past the tree line and look for a rather special set of flora and fauna. On the way up we drive through meadows full of *Veratrum lobelianum*, blue *Polemonium caucasicum*, purple-blue *Campanula glomerata*, wine-red *Aquilegia atrovinosa*. The nearby wild streaming river holds both White-bellied and Brown Dipper. Lammergeyers are patrolling the sky. The lush meadows are home to one of the strangest waders of the world; the elusive Ibisbill. The higher we go the more increasingly abundant we come across *Papaver croceum* and *Geranium collinum*. Eversmann's Redstart together with Himalayan and Brown Accentor's are quite common up here. The gorgeous White-browed Tit Warbler needs some more time to be found just as his colorful friend the Gldenstdt's Redstart! In the evening we return to our lovely guesthouse in Karakol where we enjoy another flavorful dinner.

NIGHT: Greenyard guesthouse, Karakol.

September 04, Day 6: Yeti Oguz

We start our day with a short drive towards the site of Yeti Oguz where the name derives from the rock formation's resemblance to seven bulls and a legend about a khan's, a Central Asian Lord, unfaithful wife! This unique geological formation of sheer cliffs composed of tertiary red conglomerates. The rock formation is a well-known landmark in Kyrgyzstan and is seen as a national symbol. On the nearby meadows we find stands of *Dictamnus albus*, *Codonopsis clematidea* as well as *Leontopodium fedtschenkoana* and *Polygala hybrid*. Further into the park we find Central Asian Marbled Whites flying and Blue-capped Redstarts are actively foraging along some picturesque Central Asian Yurts.

NIGHT: Greenyard guesthouse, Karakol.

September 05, Day 7: To Son Kol

In the morning we have our last exploration around Karakol – we say our goodbyes to our hosts and set sails for our first looks upon yet another gorgeous Central Asian lake,

the Son Kol Lake. On our way to Son Kol we visit a very special place called Fairy Tale Canyon which consists of convoluted multicolored clay hills and inclined strata. The birdlife is abundant with '*phoenicuroides*' Black Redstart, Mongolian Desert Finch and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush to name a few of the species we might come across. Son Kol is sometimes mentioned to be heaven on earth but the drive up to this high grassland plateau, located on 3016m, is maybe even just as spectacular! On the grasslands Steppe Horned Larks together with Skylarks are common. Some rocky formations hold good numbers of cute White-winged Snowfinches and both Yellow-billed and Red-billed Chough are patrolling the sky. In the late afternoon we arrive at the lake where we overnight in a traditional yurt. This felt made tent was the portable dwelling of the Central Asian nomads in the times when Genghis Khan's armies roamed the steppes.

NIGHT: Son Kol yurt camp

September 06, Day 8: Son Kol; workshop landscape photography

We wake up today surrounded by birds and gorgeous flowering flowers in one of the most intriguing landscapes of Central Asia, or Asia for that matter. We find ourselves between large amounts of '*calcarata*' Citrine Wagtails, a black backed form of this stunning looking bird, which find food between grazing yaks. During this day we have planned a daylong workshop about landscape photography. Like with the macro workshop we start the evening before with a presentation on the subject interesting for both beginners and people with advanced skills. We will place ourselves on a stunning spot with beautiful scenery just before sunset. We will help each one with the settings of the camera, the use of gradient filters and different approaches to produce that desired shot! After this early morning exercise, we will get some breakfast and go back in the fields to shoot some more pictures of the stunning scenery. The surroundings give us so many opportunities to improve our skills and go back home with a set of brilliant pictures of Kirgizia.

NIGHT: Son Kol Yurt camp.

September 07, Day 9: Son-Kul to Bishkek

Today will be mainly a transport day as we retrace our steps and leave Son Kol behind us to return back to the capitol Bishkek. During the drive we get familiar once more with the common lowland species such as Rose-coloured Starlings, European Rollers and Lesser Grey Shrikes. We arrive in the evening in Bishkek where the pool will welcome us for a nice refreshing dive and, as a custom in this former Soviet Union country; a final toast will be drunk on a fabulous memorial tour!!

NIGHT: Garden Hotel****, Bishkek.

September 08, Day 10: Bishkek to Tashkent

Depending on the available flight schedule we today depart in the morning from Bishkek Manas airport to the capitol of Uzbekistan Tashkent. In the afternoon we explore the city

with a local guide. In the evening we enjoy a traditional shaslick dinner in one of the many good restaurants of this characteristic capitol.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Tashkent.

September 09, Day 11: Drive Tashkent to Samarkand. After a hearty breakfast we will start out for Samarkand. En route we will hopefully have the localised Variable Wheatear staked out for us in addition to a nesting colony of White Storks. We should arrive into Samarkand in time for some preliminary exploration of this fabulous city.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Samarkand.

September 10, Day 12: Samarkand. Today there are many wonders in store for us with a day based in and around the ancient city of Samarkand. We will commence with an early morning start, driving out of the city to rocky, scrub and bush-covered hills of the Takhtakaracha Pass lying between Samarkand and Zarafshan, where Tamerlane roamed in centuries past. High on the wanted list will be White-throated Robin along with Eastern Orphean Warbler and the obscure Hume's Lark. Also here are Eastern Rock Nuthatch, Turkestan and Yellow-breasted Tits, Asian Paradise-Flycatcher and White-capped Bunting. Back in time for lunch, we will wander from our hotel into the quiet, small ancient city area to explore its historical treasures. The massive Bibi Khanum mosque (once the largest in Central Asia), The Registan, Timur's Mausoleum, the Street of Tombs and the local bazaar present a stunning and memorable "visual overload" of exquisitely elaborate tiled, painted and carved buildings.

NIGHT Comfortable tourist hotel, Samarkand.

September 11, Day 13: Samarkand to Bukhara. We can opt for an early start to nearby wetlands on the outskirts of Samarkand for such specialties as White-crowned Penduline Tit, or spend more time immersing ourselves in the historical delights of Samarkand. Later in the morning, we continue our journey along the Silk Road to Bukhara (also known locally as Buxora). Formerly one of the most important trading cities anywhere in Central Asia, there is a rich and colourful history and an overwhelming number of historic sites of interest. The turquoise-blue domes and towering minarets of Bukhara provide a wonderful backdrop to our stay here, while the markets and covered bazaars are bustling, a great place to barter for a huge range of very inexpensive souvenirs such as jewellery, spices and the famous Bukhara rugs. Needless to say, we shall have some time to explore this wonderful city.

NIGHT: Malika Bukhara Hotel****, Bukhara

September 12, Day 14: Bukhara. "So much to do – so little time"! We will have an early start to spend much of the morning exploring close-by wetlands, which surround the oasis city of Bukhara. These oases can be extremely attractive to a wealth of water and marsh-loving species and we hope for plenty of Pygmy Cormorants, Dalmatian Pelicans and Glossy Ibis and an abundance of herons and egrets, Blue-cheeked Bee-eater plus perhaps scarcer finds such as Marbled Duck. Elegant White-tailed Lapwings are easily found. The extensive reed beds, marshy and dry scrub cover here is home to many additional smaller species of interest: Menetrie's Warbler, Clamorous and Eurasian Reed warblers, Rufous-tailed Bush-Robin, Pied Bushchat and Long-tailed Shrike; (the latter two at the furthest west of their Asiatic range). Returning to the

city by late morning, we will be able to spend more time discovering further historical delights – the Ark (the fortified citadel of the Emir within the immense city walls), the Bolo-Hauz Mosque, the 10th century Ismail Samani Mausoleum and the Char Minar with its four elaborately tiled minarets.

NIGHT: Malika Bukhara Hotel****, Bukhara

September 13, Day 15: Bukhara to Tashkent. Today's birding will be perhaps one of the most memorable? A very early start must be made into the Kizil-kum desert, where we expect to arrive just after dawn. This very special region is home to one of the most sought-after of all the birds that occur in Central Asia - the legendary Turkestan (Pander's) Ground Jay. They are best located in the cool of the early morning when they can be often found along the roadside. We will return to Bukhara for lunch followed by some relaxing local birding and/or further opportunities to take in some further/last sights of Bukhara, including the historic town centre with its surrounding old madrassahs, the Kalyan Minaret - a 150 foot tall tower built in the 12th century, and also the Miri-Arab Madrasa and Trade Domes. In the evening we will take a flight from Bukhara arriving back in Tashkent in time of dinner.

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Tashkent.

September 14, Day 16: Chimgan Hills. We plan to spend our final two days in the Chimgan Hills. These lush green hills will provide a perfect ending to our amazing trip to Central Asia. Even on our final days we still will be able to show you some gorgeous little gems. Both Yellow-breasted Azure Tit and Rufous-naped Tit are the main attraction for this region and we will do more than our bests to show you these birds. Overhead we might see European and Oriental honeybuzzards. We overnight in a local ski resort right in the middle of the Chimgan Hills. In the grounds of our splendidly located Beldersay Hotel set amid mixed forest we should find Red-rumped Swallows and Common House Martins around the hotel itself, while the bushes can be alive with the cacophony of Common Nightingales, Hume's Whitethroat, Greenish and Hume's leaf warblers.

NIGHT: Beldersay Hotel, Chimgan.

September 15, Day 17: To Tashkent After some final birding in the hills during the morning we drive easily back to Tashkent after lunch. We will arrive back in Tashkent in time to enjoy a final dinner in a local traditional restaurant

NIGHT: Comfortable tourist hotel, Tashkent.

September 16, Day 18: Tashkent to home. After a splendid holiday in Central Asia it is time to depart home. We say goodbye on the Tashkent Airport from where everybody flies back home.

**** The tour schedule depends closely on internal flights, which may change from the itinerary listed. If so, the itinerary will be altered, with all of the special regions still being visited.**