

# Tulip Meadows of Kazakhstan & The Tien Shan Mountains

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Almaty
<b>Day 2</b>	Almaty
<b>Day 3/4</b>	Merke Gorge
<b>Day 5/10</b>	Aksu Dzabaqly Nature Reserve, Tien
<b>Day 11/12</b>	Saryyaiqyr Gorge, Karzhantau Ridge
<b>Day 13</b>	Drive Shimkent. Overnight train to
<b>Day 14</b>	Big Almaty Lake, Tien Shan
<b>Day 15</b>	Almaty
<b>Day 16</b>	Fly to London

### Departs

April

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ04) or brochure

### Grading

Day walks only. Grade B. Easy/moderate

### Focus

Plants, with particular emphasis on the wonderful display of wild tulips

### Highlights

- Up to 10 species of wild tulips in their homeland
- Superb displays of tulips blooming in meadows & mountains
- Abundant flora – over 6,000 species, including rare plants & endemics
- Magnificent montane scenery & Central Asian steppe
- Outstanding birdlife
- At the heart of the Old Silk Road
- Legendary Kazakhstan hospitality
- Led by a top botanical guide



*Tulipa ostrowskiana* courtesy of John Shipton



*Tulipa gregeii* courtesy of John Shipton



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**NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.**

## Introduction

Kazakhstan, lying at the heart of Central Asia on the Old Silk Road, is a massive country spanning 2,717,300 square kilometres from the Caspian Sea to western China; an area the size of the whole of western Europe! Yet, with a population of just 17 million, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open and un-peopled spaces. Great stone and sand deserts, and wide grassy steppes occupy the majority of the country, interspersed with such great inland lakes as Lake Balkhash and the Aral Sea. In dramatic contrast, along its south-eastern borders stand the mighty Tien Shan Mountains, the 1,000-mile spine of Central Asia and northern extension of the Himalaya which waters flower-filled alpine meadows, lush forests of Tien Shan Spruce and lowland Turanga, and feeds the great lakes and inland deltas to the north. It is in these diverse habitats that you may hope to see a most exciting flora, including, at this time of year, a wonderful display of flowering tulip species. The area is also home to such rare avian specialities as Dalmatian Pelican, Saker Falcon, Himalayan Snowcock, Demoiselle Crane, Macqueen's Bustard, Ibisbill, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Eversmann's Stock Dove, White-winged Woodpecker, Himalayan Rubythroat, Severtzov's Tit-warbler and Azure Tit.

## Day 1

Saturday

### In Flight

We depart London Heathrow early this morning on a scheduled service flight to Almaty (Kazakhstan's modern former capital city).

## Day 2

Sunday

### Almaty -

Arriving in Almaty in the early hours of the morning, we transfer to a city hotel and get quickly to bed in order to catch some sleep before our programme commences.

Almaty, situated at 2,500 feet above sea level, was built as a Russian military outpost in the latter part of the 19th century. Formerly known as Verny (meaning Faithful) and more recently Alma-ata, the city is today a pleasant and abundantly leafy modern metropolis with a fabulous backdrop, nestling as it does beneath the peaks of the Tien Shan.

Following a relaxing breakfast we will take our bus to Lake Kapchagai on the River Ili (which originates in China), approximately 80 km north-east of Almaty. In this arid area we should find tulips such as *Tulipa albertii*, *T. busheana* and *T. bebmiana* as well as the attractive iris *I. tenuifolia* and *Corydalis karelinii*. This area is also rich in reptiles and hopefully we will see Horsfield's Tortoise here.

We shall spend our second night in a comfortable city hotel.

**Day 3****Monday****Merke Gorge - Sanatorium**

The Otrar Hotel provides a little luxury at the start of our holiday, but after breakfast we must leave it behind.

Today we have a long journey ahead of us as we have 360 km to Merke with some botanical stops en route. Our journey will also take in a brief visit to the UNESCO World Heritage rock carvings at Tamgaly Tas, which is also a regular site for *Tulipa regeli* although this early flowerer is unlikely to be in bloom.

A picnic lunch will be taken at the Kurdai Pass. Here we should find the endangered *Berberis* relative, *Leontice eversmannii* with its showy yellow flowers and distinctive divided glaucous foliage. This site is a tulipophile's delight as we should encounter *T.kolpokovkiana*, *T.ostrowskiana* and their hybrids, providing a tapestry of yellow, orange and red flowers. We may also find the unusual leaves of *T.regelii* which flowers very early, as well a couple of *Iris* species.

En route we may observe large numbers of Demoiselle Cranes on their northward migration and we will stop to look at these if they are feeding in the fields.

We must now continue our journey to Merke where we will spend the first of two nights in the sanatorium, which is comfortable but extremely basic.

**Day 4****Tuesday****Merke Gorge - Sanatorium**

Today will be a day of local botanising with little travelling. We hope to find the small *Tulipa bifloriformis* in full bloom. Merke Gorge is situated in the Kirghiz Alatau mountain range. The steep slopes of Merke are covered by dark green clumps of ferns (*Ceterax officinarum*, *Asplenium septentrionale* and *Cystopteris fragilis*) as well as relict "Iron Tree" (*Celtis caucasica*). However, probably the star attraction of this interesting area will be Zinaida's Tulip, an endemic species of Kirghiz Alatau.

**Day 5 - 10****Wednesday - Monday****Aksu Dzabagly - Guesthouse**

We will now drive on to Aksu Dzabagly Nature Reserve, the oldest in Central Asia having been established in 1927. During today's journey we will make two major stops in order to explore both the Kuyuk Pass and the Syrdarynski Karatau range, where Greig's Tulip, the largest and most spectacular of the world's wild tulips, will be in bloom. In the riverine forests that we will also pass on our drive we will find such relict species as *Fraxinus potamophila*, numerous *Eremurus lactiflorus* and the very beautiful *Allium karataviense*.

A simple, but recently re-furbished guesthouse will be our base during our 6-night stay at Aksu Dzabagly. From it we shall explore the Boroldai Gorge, well-known for its unrivalled density of Grieg's Tulips, with 20 - 40 flowering individuals in a square metre! We will also be able to explore the distinctive Central Asian open forest that consists of *Pistacia vera* and *Crataegus pontica*, as well as *Pyrus regelii*, *Vitis vinifera*, *Crataegus turkestanicus*, *Malus sieversii*, *Sorbus persica*, *Prunus sogdiana*, and *Padus mahaleb*. We will hope, too, to find one of the rarest plants of the western Tien Shan mountains, the endemic *Thesium minkwitzianum* (Santalacea). At the Gorges of Aksu we will look for numerous

ephemeroids, most of which are endemic. They include *Fritillaria sewerzovi*, *F. stenanthemum*, *Scilla pushkinoides*, over ten species of flowering Gagea, *Crocus alatavicus*, *Iridodictyum kolpakowskianum* and *Isilirion tataricum*. We will also encounter over ten species of flowering Astragalus, several species of beautiful buttercups and three attractive species of Corydalis.

## Day 11 - 12

Tuesday - Wednesday

### Saryyaigyr Gorge - Cabins

On these days we will take a 2-day trip to the Saryyaigyr Gorge in the Karzhantau Ridge. Here spectacular slopes will reward us with thickets of *Ferula tenuisecta*, *F. penninervis*, *Prangos pabularia*, and patches of forest consisting of the very beautiful 'weeping' form of *Juniperus semiglobosa*. The population of Kaufmann's Tulips will be our main attraction here, with over ten different forms in bloom! Other species include *Polygonatum sewerzovi*, *Ranunculus paucidentatus* and *Saxifraga sibirica*. We should find two attractive species of Juno Iris the yellow *I.tubergeniana* and the pale blue *I.capnoides*.

We will stay in comfortable cabins for two nights at Saryyaigyr Gorge to allow us plenty of time to explore and enjoy the area over two days. A wood stove sauna is provided.

## Day 13

Thursday

### Shimkent (for Overnight Train to Almaty)

We drive today to Shimkent, botanising a little en route, from where we shall catch the overnight sleeper train to Almaty.

## Day 14

Friday

### Tien Shan Mountains - Observatory

On our arrival by train in Almaty this morning, we will board a powerful 4-wheel drive truck for our journey up the rough road which ascends for an hour or so above the capital, into the high mountain spruce forests and meadows of the Tien Shan Mountains. Here, most unusually, we shall be based for the night in a former Soviet Astronomical Observatory! Whilst the hostel-like accommodation is rather dilapidated, and clearly now operates largely to raise funds to some small extent for the continued operation of the Observatory that is now run by the Kazakhstan government, the very genuine hospitality of the hard-working ladies that run it is touching.

The accommodation offered at the Observatory consists of twin rooms, with each toilet and wash basin shared between three rooms, plus a hot shower and sauna shared between the group.

It is from this rather unusual base that we will be able to enjoy the fine flora of the high meadows of the Tien Shan, for the Observatory is situated at an altitude of around 10,000 feet. It will be cold here, but hopefully very rewarding! For those with any energy remaining this evening, and if the weather is clear, the sunset over the mountains is well worth staying out for, and makes a fine end to a rewarding day.

## Day 15

Saturday

### Almaty –

We will spend a full morning exploring the fabulous mountain habitats that surround the Observatory. On the mountain slopes all around the Observatory lie colourful alpine pastures, stately forests of Tien Shan Spruce, and areas of boulders and Turkestanic Juniper cover beloved of accentors, warblers and finches. Above tower craggy peaks and snowbound summits from which Himalayan Snowcocks loudly pronounce their domain, and where wary Ibex wander. Below lies Bolshoy Almaty Lake, not a lake at all but a reservoir that sits above a dam, whose shingle shores attract breeding Ibisbills.

The area is not only a botanist's paradise (particularly once the snows have melted) but also a real treat for birdwatchers. From the juniper scrub, Brown and Black-throated Accentors, Himalayan Rubythroats, Hume's Yellow-browed and Sulphur-bellied Warblers, and Severtzov's Tit-warblers all sing, and restless Red-mantled Rosefinches and noisy White-winged Grosbeaks may also be found. This area is also favoured by Grey Marmots and appealing Red Pikas. In the forests of Tien Shan Spruce Oriental Turtle Dove, Blue-headed and Eversmann's Redstarts, Songar Tits, Crossbills and Red-fronted Serins may all be found. Overhead Lammergeiers, and Himalayan Griffon, Eurasian Griffon and Eurasian Black Vultures may all be seen as they cruise the thermals high amongst the peaks above us.

Returning for lunch at the Observatory, we must reluctantly board our 4-wheel drive truck this afternoon for the rough ride back down to Almaty. There you will have time to relax and have a couple of hours to explore Almaty, freshen up and enjoy a farewell dinner, perhaps even catching a few hours sleep before we must depart for the airport for a return flight to London.

## Day 16

Sunday

### London Heathrow

We will have to depart the hotel at about 2 a.m. this morning in time to catch a scheduled flight from Almaty to London. We are scheduled to arrive in London mid- morning.

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## Grading

This is a primarily a straightforward botany tour. However, much of our botanising will be carried out on foot, and during our stay at Aksu Dzabagly in particular we shall explore by taking leisurely paced day walks, often taking a picnic lunch to maximise our time in the field. On such walks we are likely to cover between 3 and 6 miles in a day. No trekking or great hardship are involved. The holiday is therefore quite suitable for those of all ages and degrees of fitness... provided a spirit of adventure travels with you! After all, this is Kazakhstan - a former Soviet state with a great deal of development ahead of it! Only in Almaty do tourist standard hotels exist.

## Weather

Kazakhstan lies in the northern hemisphere and therefore shares our seasons. Its weather is best likened to that of such east European countries as Romania, Bulgaria or Turkey, i.e. long hot summers, and long cold winters! Our tour is scheduled to run during the spring - the best time to enjoy the fabulous displays of flowering bulbous plants, in particular the tulips - and you can reasonably expect mainly clear and sunny weather, although it is likely to be cool at times, particularly at higher altitudes. Daytime temperatures are likely to range between 15 and 25°Centigrade in the steppes and deserts, and between 5 and 15°Centigrade in the mountains. They are likely to fall by 10 degrees or more during the nights. Rain, if it is going to fall, is most likely in the mountains. Please note that whilst the preceding details relate to a 'normal' year, heavy snow can fall during the early spring season and temperatures may briefly fall well below zero. Such conditions are rarely long lasting but have affected two previous Naturetrek tours although on each occasion it was still possible to complete the itinerary and the botanical objectives were achieved.

## Clothing

Please inspect the separate clothing list, included in our pre-departure information, thoroughly.

Warm clothing will be essential in the mountains, particularly during the early mornings and evenings. Shorts and T-shirts may be more suitable in the steppes and deserts.

## Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included in the cost of this holiday. During your nights in Almaty you will be based at a very comfortable tourist hotel of international standard, each room with private facilities. In Aksu Dzabagly (for 6 nights) we use a simple guesthouse with modest shared facilities, whilst the accommodation offered for your night at the Observatory in the Tien Shan Mountains consists of twin rooms, with each toilet and wash basin shared between three rooms, plus a hot shower shared between the group. At Merke where we stay in the sanatorium, the accommodation is very simple with shared facilities and basic unheated cabins are used for our two nights at Sairyaigyr Gorge where there is a wood stove sauna and compost toilets. Excellent food is provided by our hosts here.

## Extra expenses

Please note that we do not include the following items in the cost of this holiday: all items of a personal nature such as drinks, laundry, souvenirs, and tips for your guide and driver (allow £40).

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.