



**CELESTIAL SILK ROAD
TRIP REPORT
2016**

ViRA NATURA
TOURS

Day 1 5 June – To Tashkent

The long but unavoidable haul to Central Asia from various points of the globe...

Day 2 6 June – Arrive Tashkent and to Beldersay

An early hours arrival for some was aided by our Mr. Fixit at the airport who smoothed progress and saved an hour or more. The hotel was only a few minutes away and a few hours sleep was possible. Leaving mid-morning we wrestled with the traffic before finding open roads and the route up towards the far western end of the Tien Shan or Celestial Mountains. Along the roadside were *Salvia sclarea*, *Achillea filipendulina* and *Inula macrophylla*, then as we climbed higher to the hotel there were the first tantalising stands of *Eremurus robustus*. Dropping our bags at the hotel we then took the simple cableway up to 2100m passing over gentians, orchids and more foxtail lilies amidst the mature juniper forests. We had a picnic with a view as some local lads treated a horse much like a fast car, charging about the turf to impress one another.

This afternoon was our chance to see a very special flower and we walked slowly up towards the top of the ridge passing the first purplish spires of *Eremurus regeli* and stands of *Phlomoides fulgens*, and the to be avoided *Prangos pabularia* (the sap causes severe skin blistering). Then we found the first *Iris korolkovii*, a delightful species with delicate dark veining on a whitish-buff background and chocolatey stain in the centre. More fine stands of *Eremurus regeli* followed as clouds of butterflies took off from patches of *Lagotis stolonifera* with at least three species of fritillary, swallowtails, banded graylings, etc. Reaching the top there were fine views down into Ugam-Chatkal Nature Reserve and nearby were the spathes of *Arum korolkovii*, which were not exactly showy. As we walked downslope there were more clumps of *Iris korolkovii* and these just got better and better, culminating in superb big plants with at least ten blooms. There was also an rather lovely pale morph that lacked the dark pigment and instead had yellowish veins. Cutting across the hill to reach the cableway we found pink *Pseudosedum lievenii* and that completed our short but productive first foray into the Tien Shan, The cableway took us down again and we jumped off at the hotel stop.

The only downside to the day was the sudden shock news there was no beer at the hotel. Eventually one large can was produced to at least allow a toast to George and Lizzie's forty-fourth wedding anniversary. Cheers.



Iris korolkovii

Today was going to be very warm with clear blue skies for our walk up the Chimgan Valley. However, it was packed with flowers beginning with lovely displays of roses with *Rosa kokanica*, *R. ecae* and *R. fedtschenkoana* (and *R. corymbifera* higher up) mingled with billowing masses of mauve *Vicia cracca*, a few *Gentiana olivieri* and the deep purplish-pink of *Allium barszczewskii*. It was impossible to miss the huge wands of *Eremurus robustus* and as we walked there were more and more impressive stands culminating in a superb area with hundreds of towering pinkish-white spikes. The foamy masses of *Polygonum undulatum* became more common as we slowly gained height also finding *Phlomis ostrowskiana*, *Dracocephalum integrifolium*, the bright red seedheads flowers of *Rheum maximowiczii* amidst many yellow *Hypericum scabrum* and a scattering of blue *Ixiolirion tataricum*. Butterflies were abundant throughout the walk including some beautiful Tien Shan Apollos. The scenery grew more impressive and mountainous as we climbed up into a narrower gorge with *Primula matthioli* by a streamside on the edge of a birch wood. Lunch was among the birch with a bit of shade and a cool breeze.

Exploring the upper slope afterwards threw up a few bonuses with a few red and yellow *Tulipa dubia* as well as deep cerise *Paeonia tenuifolia* (= *hybrida*), pure white *Anemone narcissiflora* ssp. *protracta* and on the open slopes lovely clumps of pink *Linum olgae* as well as the odd *Dictamnus albus*. We descended taking more photos and then crossing back over to the stunning stands of *Eremurus robustus* this time with the light on our side to give a superb mountain backdrop. After a hot but productive day in the hills it was good to get back in the relative cool of the hotel and rehydrate.

This time the beer had arrived.



Eremurus robustus

Day 4**8 June – Beldersay**

The fine weather continued and we took a slow wander up from the hotel and then along beneath the cable way where we soon found some fine *Gentiana olivieri* and stands of *Allium barszewskii*. A side track led alongside a warmer drier gully with some flowering *Salvia sclarea* and *Cousinia fetisowii* as well as the seed heads of *Tulips x tschimganica* and *Fritillaria severzovii*. Roses were a strong feature of the walk with some superb bushes of *Rosa fedtschenkoana* smothered with big white flowers as well as the ubiquitous yellow *Rosa kokanica*. A little stream held *Primula matthioli* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* and as we progressed upslope there were the bizarre swollen seed pods of *Eremurus lactiflorus*. The track wound around the hillside offering views of Chimgan peak, stands of *Eremurus robustus*, *Ligularia macrophylla* and *Iris halophila*.

Lunch was in the shade of some junipers with a superb flowery shrub of *Rosa fedtschenkoana* alongside. Retracing our steps back to the hotel we stopped to photograph views and then a delightful ‘meadow’ of *Rosa ecae* that clothed a slope with yellow flowers. It was another hot day and we were glad to return early to the cool of the hotel and glass of cold beer. We said farewell to Vasiliy our trusty mountain guide who had to head back to the heat of Tashkent. The evening meal was a drive away at Borchka where we also saw some fine petroglyphs and *Scutellaria immaculata* on the rocks. Slava produced a bottle of vodka, which by tradition had to be polished off once opened...!

Tomorrow we moved on to our next location and next country – Kazakhstan.

Day 5**9 June – To Dzabagly**

It was to be another hot day (unseasonably so) and the warmth was building as we drove down to the border near Tashkent. Assistance in ferrying the bags to the immigration building was welcome in the heat. However, as we walked a large crowd was coming back down and it seemed the border was closed or at least to most people, we were to carry on and indeed had a very smooth ride through both sets of officials and met Yevgeny of the otherside after we fought past the throng of taxi drivers and moneychangers. Two hours across the hot steppe with abundant *Alcea nudiflora* and bushy pink *Convolvulus pseudocantabricus* brought us to Chimkent and lunch. A further hour and half had us rumbling up the main street of Dzabagly and the relative cool of a big walnut tree and our guesthouse.



Rosa fedtschenkoana

Day 6

10 June – Ulkun Kaindi Valley

After a bit of vehicle rearranging we were off into the excellent Aksu-Dzabagly Nature Reserve, driving up through vast meadows brimming with flowers. Reaching the small mountain house we set off across the trackless meadows forging a path through the tall *Ligularia macrophylla* and onto a stony ridge through roses and swathes of *Hypericum elongatum* punctuated by spires of purplish *Delphinium confusum*. As we progressed the rich red-purple bells of *Aquilegia atrovinosa* appeared and big clumps of *Linum olgae*. Then reaching a large rocky outcrop we searched for *Primula minkwitzsiae* eventually finding one tucked among the rocks. There were also some cushions of *Androsace sericea* on the stony flats nearby, whilst further up we could see the glowing orange of *Trollius altaicus* amidst snow white *Anemone narcissiflora* ssp. *protracta*. Lunch was taken among these and the now abundant *Aquilegia atrovinosa*.

It was clearly an early season and the snow was well up the valley, so we continued up in search of choice alpinists, finding the delightful blue of *Stephanocaryum olgae* filling many crevices in a side valley along with some superb plants of *Primula minkwitzsiae* and a few *Paraquilegia caespitosa*. Alas *Iris willmottianum* was not to be this year, the snow had already receded too far, so we started our descent, stopping again for the superb aquilegia. It was now that Gill's constant scanning of the snows paid off with a two well grown Brown Bear cubs gambolling in the snow, sliding down and then chasing up again. Another treat on the descent was excellent clumps of *Dictamnus albus* and red-pink *Hedysarum talassicum*. Back at the house there was a cup of tea waiting and then we set off back across the endless tall meadows and down again to the village.

Day 7

11 June – Aksu-Dzabagly NR

Unfortunately the promised cars had suddenly vanished and been given to some visiting Kazakhs instead. So we were left with option of walking up to Halfway House, but this turned out to be not so bad after all and we had an enjoyable (if hot) walk up through the flowery meadows. Early on there was a fine clump of *Gentiana olivieri*, lots of pink *Stachys betoniciflora* and then another blue with *Allium caesium*. Butterflies were abundant and ever present as we walked climbing up to where there was an abundant silky-plumed *Stipa* sp waving in the breeze and meadows with *Veronica spuria* and *Delphinium confusum* among the ever present *Hypericum elongatum*, pink *Betonica betonicifolia* and white *Rosa fedtschenkoana*. From a viewpoint the rocks were decorated with *Spiraea pilosa* and *Campanula alberti*. Arriving at the little house we sat in the shade and had some lunch and rest.

Afterwards there was the prize of the walk the beautiful pink-flowered *Morina kokanica* growing on rocky slopes. From here we returned finding *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*, *Primula matthioli* and *Codonopsis clematidea* in a wet flush, more silky stipa, and then the somewhat furry-looking *Hedysarum plumosum* to complete the botany for the day. We arrived back in good time to clean up and sample a well-earned cold beer.



Day 8 12 June – To Talas via Kara-Bura Pass

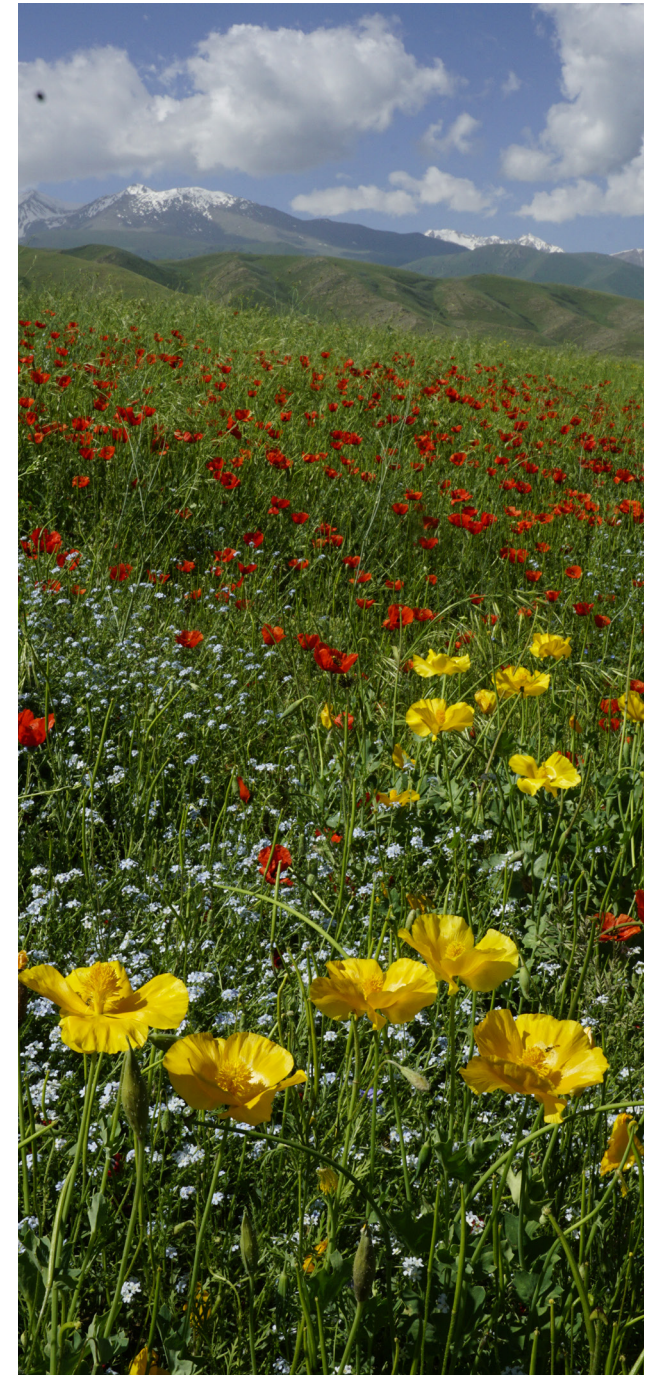
Different day, different country. Today we travelled to Kyrgyzstan, leaving the guest house at 9am, we arrived at the border near Taraz two hours later. Formalities were straightforward enough and we only took half an hour to cross and meet up with our Kyrgyz team headed by the immaculately-presented Lilya. Heading off across the warm steppe we stopped briefly to look at the abundant *Acanthophyllum pungens* that coloured the roadside with big domes of pink. There were more as we turned inland towards the mountains, and as we climbed slowly many flower-laden bushes of *Rosa corymbifera* (though much smaller flowered than we'd previously seen at Chimgan) and colonies of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* appeared.

However, the vehicles were having difficulty on steep road and were overheating so we stopped to take lunch beside a stream. On the hillside was a large population of *Onobrychis cornuta*, the spiny domes smothered in pink flowers. The nearby shrubberies had *Lonicera karelinii*, *L. hispida* and *L. microphylla* as well as *Sorbus tianshanicus* in fine flower. A solitary *Primula algida* hinted at what might have been if we'd been able to reach the snow. Tucked among the shrubs were delicate *Thalictrum thalictroides* and *Viola sieheana*. It seemed wise not to push the vehicles so we descended stopping for a fine colony of *Codonopsis dematidea* with several flowers poised at a good angle to photograph their exquisitely patterned insides. A cold shower had us scurrying back for the vehicles, but our next stop was in the dry with cliffs peppered with large plants of slender *Campanula alberti*. A last stop was for a mystery shrub laden with pink flowers growing next to *Peganum harmala*.

From here we drove onto our comfortable homestays and a lavish dinner in a yurt.

Day 9 13 June – Otmok and Ala Bel Passes

A sensational plant day began with the intense mix of *Glaucium squamigerum* and *Roemeria refracta* not far out of Talas, where they clothed a rise with snowy peaks in the background. A soft blue *Lappula tianshanica*. provided the ideal foil for all of this vibrance and among the ubiquitous strong-scented Artemisia were many purple spikes of *Orobanche amoena*. Moving along and higher up we stopped near a slope with rock outcrops peppered with the golden spires of *Eremurus fuscus*, *Campanula alberti* and abundant *Spiraea pilosa*. Large flowery clumps of *Scutellaria przewalskii* were common and Lammergeiers made several spectacular low passes overhead. *Pseudosedum lievenii* was among the rocks and then near the foot of the slope the purple of *Linaria bungei* and spikes of orangey *Phlomooides fetisowii*. On the opposite slope was a population of *Phlomooides oreophila*, with countless more colouring the higher slopes. Indeed our next stop was for a big spread of these beside the road. Lunch was taken in the alpine zone with sheets of *Primula algida*. Among these were *Dracocephalum nutans*, *Tulipa dasystemon*, *Chorispora macropoda* and both orange *Trollius altaicus* and white *T. komarovii*.



Glaucium squamigerum

Topping the pass we descended a little and then stopped for a sheet of blue *Myosotis asiatica* with *Cerastium cerastoides*. Such vivid brushstrokes of colour continued and grew as we drove with an amazing kaleidoscope of pink, white, blue and yellow colouring the grasslands. We stopped for yellow *Phlomis speciosa* and then for a delightful meadow packed with flowers. Here there were the orange goblets of *Trollius altaicus*, white *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza*, *Ligularia heterophylla*, *Alchemilla tianshanica*, *Primula pamirica*, *Leontopodium ochroleuca* and big inflorescences of *Rheum cordatum*. A wetter slope beyond had abundant *Pedicularis rhinanthoides* and *Polygonum elliptica* (=nitens) mingled among the thousands of other flowers already mentioned. And on the road above were the rich yellow flowers of *Papaver croceum* and white *Tripleurospermum* sp.

All of this floral heaven was rounded off with a vast display of *Eremurus fuscus* as we drove down to our riverside hotel nestled among the spruces and firs at Chichkan.

Day 10 14 June – To Kochkor

Today was a long transfer day, taking us across a broad range of landscapes and with many different plants. To start off with there was *Scutellaria adenostegia* shortly after we left the hotel and then we stopped for a delightful meadow packed with *Phlomis oreophila*, *Polygonum elliptica* and *Pedicularis dolichorrhiza*. Another floral bonanza awaited just over the Ala Bel pass, with vivid orange *Trollius altaicus* erupting from a carpet of *Myosotis asiatica*, *Pedicularis alberti* and *Primula algida*. There were also drifts alongside the river and a beautiful mountain back drop. Continuing across the wide grassy plain we stopped for stands of *Polemonium caucasicum* growing among yellow-flowered *Caragana pleioblasta* scrub. Moving on we turned down into a long rocky gorge with a raging river alongside. Granite gravels had the pretty *Chesneya ferganica* and *Arnebia guttata* and as we progressed the landscape grew more dramatic with spectacular long screes descending from the mountains. The many poplars were somehow holding the bank together and preventing the waters from sweeping the road away. A blue haze of *Perovskia abrotanoides* lined the road in places, shortly before we stopped for a particular impressive set of rock formations with rich reds and banded white-and-red rocks. Lunch was taken just beneath this striking landform in some of the little shade available on a very warm day.

Continuing on our way we rumbled along some pretty poor roads and through rural Kyrgyzstan stopping for *Clematis songaricus* and then for one of the many distinctive graveyards we'd seen along the way with a blend of grand mausoleums, brick tombs and modest graves. Drifts of *Thermopsis turkestanica* coloured damp pastures and there were large drifts of reddish *Lindelofia stylosa* before we climbed to the rather unflowery pass. However, on the descent a rocky slope had a wonderful population of *Convolvulus tragacanthoides*, the domes smothered in flowers and alongside were many domes of pink *Acantholimon alatavicum*. Coming into Kochkor there was a vivid and long-lived rainbow illuminating the fluted hills beyond the town.

Eremurus fuscus



A fabulous flower day, though the early weather suggested quite the opposite with a glowering grey sky and low cloud clinging to the mountains. Initially there was nothing to see and then a drift of *Dactylorhiza umbrosa* mixed with *Primula pamirica*. Ascending towards the lake we stopped at a bend where there was a drift of *Trollius dzungaricus* and on a stony ridge a rich alpine spread of white *Astragalus sp.* and *Androsace sericea*, pink *Hedysarum sp.* and deep purple *Dracocephalum paulsenii*. The clouds were beginning to lift and by the time we'd arrived at our next stop the sun was pushing through, illuminating the many lovely *Trollius lilacinus* that peppered the slopes below the snow patches. Among these and elsewhere on the turf were *Tulipa dasystemon* and nodding bells of *Tulipa heterophylla* as well as abundant *Allium atrosanguineum*. A little way back down the road several of us went to see the incredible *Schmalhausenia nidulans* the thick woolly spires beset with mauve flowers. A short distance further on and we reached the pass with fine views of the huge Song Kul in one direction and the deep valley we'd come up on the other. Rocks thereabouts were encrusted with orange lichens and plastered with mats of mauve *Oxytropis chionobis*, plus the odd *Saxifraga macrocalyx*, *Androsace lehmanniana* and tumbling shrubs of *Lonicera semenovii*.

Lunch was taken below rocks with more alpiners and views of the lake and herds of yaks contentedly munching their way across the slopes. Afterwards we carried on down to lake level driving alongside (though never close to) the lake past big purple splashes of *Dracocephalum paulsenii* before crossing an inlet and beginning a climb up and into the dramatic granitic landscape that surrounds the lake. *Iris loczyi* caught our eye, growing with *Pedicularis alatauica*, silvery-leaved *Potentilla hololeuca* and among the rocks pretty *Thalictrum thalictroides*. The canyons grew deeper and more impressive before we reached our last main stop, a series of dramatic switchbacks that led down near a tract of Tien Shan Spruce. Here were many different flowers with delights such as *Cortusa brotheri* common, flowering alongside *Doronicum turkestanica*, *Dracocephalum imperbe*, *Anemone narcissiflora* ssp. *protracta*, *Linum altaicum*, beautiful flower encrusted mats of *Androsace sericea* and then the black-purple of *Macrotomia euchroma* with its wonderful sily-haired calyx lobes catching the light. Driving down and then along the valley flanked by forested slopes and granite crags on one side and smoother grass slopes of the other (many showing dramatic differences in colour depending on their aspect) we eventually began to climb. Photo stops were made for particularly dramatic places with the late afternoon light providing shadowing and depth to the landscape. Slopes were still clothed with abundant *Trollius dzungaricus* and *Aster alpinus* before we dropped down to the smooth tarmac and the ride to Naryn.



Schmalhausenia nidulans

Day 12 16 June – Tash Rabat

A rainy start and the tall At Bashi Mountains were partially obscured with mists as we drove directly to Tash Rabat, or at least to the cliffs nearby. By the time we arrived the weather had improved and studding the crevices were beautiful round clumps of that most choice of alpines *Paraquilegia caespitosa*. Climbing bit further up we found even better, bigger clumps and largely ignored the *Cortusa brotheri* on the slope. Near the road were also some *Chorispora bungeana*, but nothing was going to distract from the Paraquilegia. From here we drove onto the cold stone of Tash Rabat, a Nestorian church that had latterly become a caravanserai before becoming a cowshed before being restored by Russian archaeologists. Lunch was warm and welcome in a yurt.

In the afternoon we visited the vague ruins of Kashi Korgon, a formerly more significant fort with links to Manas and the Silk Road. Singing Bluethroats were a highlight for some and the very close nesting Kestrels a pleasure for all. There was still time to stop first for some flowery clumps of *Iris halophila* and then at a little valley with a waterfall, where *Ligularia narynensis* was very common and *Clematis alpina* ssp *sibirica* tumbled over the shubberies. *Rosa alberti* was also in good flower and in the meadows were *Stellera chamejasme*, *Onosma* sp. and *Linum olgae*. A cool shower had us back to the vehicles quickly and then onto Naryn where they had obviously had a lot more rain.

Day 13 17 June – To Tamga via Fairytale Canyon

In order to reach our next prime locations we had to move onto Issyk-Kul the vast lake that dominates the north-east of the country. Leaving Naryn we drove for forty minutes and then stopped to explore a pleasant and verdant valley. Thronging the marshy grasses and streamsidings was abundant *Primula matthioli*, whilst on the adjacent banks were *Codonopsis clematidea*, *Phlomooides oreophila*, *Valeriana dubia* and pink *Pedicularis macrochila*. Bursting between *Trollius dzungaricus* was a fiesty *Rheum cordatum*. Moving on there were views of the convoluted mountains before crossing an area of steppe and arriving at Issyk-Kul where we found a roadside picnic spot beneath some trees.

Fragrant *Elaeagnus angustifolious* lined the road as we continued driving through rather gloomy weather until we reach Fairytale Canyon. This fascinating area of coloured rocks also held some new plants with the bizarre dense columns of *Cynomorium songaricum*, amid *Dracocephalum integrifolium*, *Lagochilus seravshanicus* and pretty pink *Limonium kaschgaricum*. The clouds had drifted away and the sun was out, bringing out the rich colours of the rocks as we wandered about finding good viewpoints with architectural rock forms. There were also some more interesting plants with a bright yellow *Haplophyllum* sp. the attractive leaves of a *Chesneya* sp. and then just before we left Bob showed us plant of *Dracocephalum bipinnatum* he'd found.

It was just a short drive to our guesthouse with it's pleasant garden.



The high plateau of Barskoon is a spectacular area but one prone to fickle weather as we found out today. Heading up along the well-maintained dirt road (that serves the large Kumtor gold mine) we stopped for a patch of *Iris ruthenica*. Some confusion on my part as to which bend to stop at wasted a bit of time although we did at least find *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and yellow *Draba oreades*. Eventually the right location was reached where many *Primula nivalis* lined a bank near the meltwater stream. Moving across to the chunky scree there were also many superb *Desideria flabellata* in a range of subtle shades of lilac-pink suffused with blue as well as a few cream-coloured forms. Reaching the pass a wide area of partially frozen lakes and mountains spread out before us and we found more big populations of *Primula nivalis* as we crossed. Turning off onto a side-track we drove through were increasing numbers of *Trollius lilacinus* until we could go no further without stopping to photograph superb groups and drifts of this delightful flower. In fact there were staggering quantities of *Trollius lilacinus* on the plateau with patches illuminating the ground at every turn. Among them were abundant rich-yellow *Oxygraphis glacialis* and the round white heads of *Smelovskia calycina*. Unfortunately we reached a point where there was a serious break in the (new) road and the vehicles could go no further.

So after eating lunch in the cars we donned our warm and waterproof clothing a set off to walk to the lakes about a mile away. The wind was cold but by the time we'd reached the icy lakes it has eased considerably and the sun had come out. Around the rocks near the lake were many *Saxifraga macrocalyx*, a few *Pyrethrum leontopodium* and fresh yellow *Allium semenowii*. The turf was comfortable to lie on in the sun and we all enjoyed a few minutes to relax before setting off once again. Climbing up to the scree runs behind the lake there were superb patches of *Callianthemum alatavicum* as well as more lakeland views. However, the first flurry of snow now arrived so we kept moving across the slope also finding a *Saussurea gnaphalodes* almost in flower and then a wonderful population of thousands of *Callianthemum alatavicum* sprinkled like big snowflakes across the slope. The real thing was increasing in intensity by now and as we crossed the 'tundra' to the road it really picked up. By the time we reached the cars it was a blizzard and we drove back across the plateau barely able to see the landscape, which just a hour ago had been clear and sunny.

Once we'd descending to a lower altitude the weather cleared up and we could see the sweeping slopes and ranks of *Picea schrenkiana*. A brief stop was made for a big painted relief of Yuri Gargarin and then we drove on to Karakol in the sunshine, past a colourful patchwork of fields and stands of the giant hogweed *Heracleum dissectum*, arriving at our comfortable hotel in good time.



Trollius lilacinus

Day 15

19 June – Chon Ashu Pass

Our last day in the field in Kyrgyzstan and the sun was shining. We stopped on the way for the colourful fields of *Onobrychis* and *Echium vulgare* and then spent time in an area of mixed herbaceous plants that included *Dactyloctenium aegyptium*, *Aconitum leucostomum*, *Aquilegia atrovinosa*, *Veratrum lobelianum* and orange *Hieracium aurantiacum*. A sudden rain shower had us hurrying back to the vehicles but it was quite short-lived and we were able to take photos of the typical Tien Shan valley landscape further on. A clump of *Rhodiola linearifolia* was next and then we drove on direct to the pass through an increasingly dramatic landscape of immense richly-coloured scree and rocky slopes. Stopping at the pass we enjoyed a sunny interlude with clear views of the 5200m mountains to the south. Big cushions of *Potentilla biflora* were tantalising but inaccessible to us. Descending a bit we stopped in an alpine-rich area with *Dracocephalum imperbe*, *Saxifraga hirculus*, *Corydalis gortschakovii*, *Comastoma falcata*, *Androsace lehmanniana*, *Rhodiola gelida* and big mats and domes of *Sibbaldia tetrandra*. After a while a snow squall sent us down further, passing by the huge scree fields before stopping to take lunch and let the weather improve.

And the weather did abate more or less with more and more sunny breaks. Immediately outside the vehicles were *Androsace sericea* and *Taraxacum lilacinum*. Crossing onto the scree we reached an area with plenty of gorgeous *Corydalis fedtschenkoana* that looked stunning amid the raw slate. Plenty of time was spent with these and nearby slopes also held *Thermopsis alpina*, *Chorisopra bungeana*, *Aster alpinus* and sweet scented soft-yellow *Erysimum humilimum*, whilst further down there was *Saxifraga sibirica*. Driving down we stopped for more views and then drifts of the pale form of *Geranium collinum* before a final heavy downpour brought an end to the botanising.

We reached Karakol in good time to buy souvenirs and other essentials. The evening meal was in a Dungan home with a huge selection of Chinese-style dishes on offer.

Day 16

20 June – To Saty/To Bishkek

Sadly Gillian was leaving us and driving to Bishkek (seeing the petroglyphs of Cholpon-Ata and the Burana Tower on the way) so we said our farewells and went our separate ways, with the rest of us heading north-east towards Kazakhstan. The landscape became one of foothills and flowery slopes, though with the Tien Shan ever present in the distance. We stopped for a slope with *Limonium* sp., *Dracocephalum bipinnatum*, (and abundant *D. integrifolium*), as well as a slender purple *Delphinium* sp. Another stop soon after was for an *Aster* sp., the delicate white flowers of *Dianthus crinitus* and superb stands of the feisty onion *Allium carolinianum* which grew in heavy scree. The road continued into flat meadows full of flowers right up to the pleasantly low-key border with polite saluting soldiers and minimal customs. We met our guides Vladimir and Artur and set off across the steppe to the town of Kegen where we had a tasty (and enormous) lunch.

Corydalis fedtschenkoanus



Driving across the vast landscape there were impressive swathes coloured yellow with brassicas and interspersed with stands of the fine thistle *Carduus nutans*. There was stops at viewpoints for the Charyn river and a black rock canyon and the for an amazing field of *Echium vulgare* that seemed to extend to the looming grey sky. A final section of rough road past more meadows and close to the ranks of dark spruce trees that clothed the slopes brought us to our village homestay, which though rustic and basic (and lacking indoor plumbing) it served a fine evening meal.

Day 17 21 June – Kaindy Lake

We boarded our 4WD transport and set off for the rough road to Kaindy Lake, which involved several river crossings. The trusty Russian-made UAZ led the way and our second vehicle a fancy Japanese Delica followed. All went well to begin with and we stopped after a while for a stand of *Phlomooides tuberosa*. In the adjacent meadows were many more flowers including fine stands of spidery limbed near-white *Leontopodium fedtschenkoana* and the stout purple spikes of *Veronica porphyriana*. there was also the odd spire of *Delphinium iliense* but more of those were to follow. At the next river crossing the UAZ made it across no problem but the second vehicle made a mess of it and got well and truly stuck in the river. Despite the attempts of the UAZ to pull it free we all had to climb out and make out way to dry land (luckily there was a dry route to get us there). From here we started to walk while the vehicles sorted themselves out and this was no bad thing as the meadows were thronging with flowers including several more *Delphinium iliense*, drifts of *Rhinanthus angustifolius*, lovely groups of blue *Allium caeruleum*, *Dracocephalum ruyschiana* and abundant *Codonopsis clematidea*, whilst the fluffy spikes of *Plantago media* gave the meadows a delightful whimsical touch.

Reaching the guard house we took a break for a snack and some tea before carrying on. The UAZ then caught us up and began ferrying the group to the lake. Some of us kept walking through a pleasant tract of birch forest with tall *Aconitum leucostomum* and plentiful *Geranium rectum*. Eventually we all made the top and (after gorging on wild strawberries) then began our walk around the lake. There was an upper viewpoint of all of the ghostly dead tree trunks that now fill part of the lake and then we wandering down towards the shore seeing many more *Codonopsis clematidea* among the *Rosa alberti*, with the scrambling stems of cream and rusty-orange *Lathyrus gmelinii*, *geraniums*, *Polemonium caucasicum*, *Ligularia songarica* and many other herbs. We reached a lower viewpoint for the flooded ghost forest, though the water was milky rather than tourist poster blue after all of the rain. Walking back up we photographed *Sedum hybridum* on the rocks.

Half the group drove down with the UAZ and were reunited with the now shamed Delica, driving back for a latish but nonetheless delicious lunch of plov. The rest of us walked down for a while and were then picked up and driven back for our lunch. At 4pm we decided to try a pay a visit to the first Kolsai lake and drive along the bumpy road, negotiated the scowling ticket lady and made out way to the lake lookout. Unfortunately heavy rain had now arrived and plenty more could be seen ahead so we abandoned our plan of taking a boat out on the lake and drove back instead for a cold beer or tea at the guest house.



Leontopodium fedtschenkoana

Day 18 22 June – Charyn Canyon

We left our homestays and their exterior plumbing and drive west, stopping for a flowery stretch with *Phlomis tuberosa*, *Lathyrus tuberosus* and the fluffy wands of *Plantago media*. Moving on we crossed steppe and rocky slopes until we arrived at the rim of the Charyn Canyon, an impressive assemblage of eroded rock formations. Exploring the various viewpoints we were treated to many different combinations of contorted rocks, towers, colourful cliffs and massive fallen blocks. Here and there were flowering plants of *Echinops nanus*. The sun was with us in the morning, but later as we descended to the canyon floor and walked on to our lunch, the clouds began to gather. It was interesting to see the various formations from a different angle and we also found flowering mounds of *Acanthophyllum aculeatum*.

During lunch spits of rain grew into steadier rain by the time we'd finished eating. Transport of a fashion was provided to take us back up, placing cardboard on the wet seat and a box over yours truly who hadn't brought a coat with him. From a now soggy Charyn we drove on to Altin Emel, stopping to buy champagne for George's birthday. The landscape was mainly monotonous saline steppe with lots of tamarisk, though there was also a large tract of riverine ash woodland. Driving along the actual route of the Silk Road the mountains in the distance grew closer and it was more rugged and appealing by the time we'd arrived at our comfortable hotel on the edge of the national park.

Champagne and chocolates went down well with another plate of plov.

Day 19 23 June – Altin Emel National Park

A truly stunning landscape experience was the order of the day. We trundled out across the saline steppe all the way to the Aktau Mountains and immediately we were confronted by multicoloured hills, red and grey banded rocks and cliffs perched atop steep scree slopes. Moving through the valley there were countless photo stops as the sun came through and illuminated the diverse landscape. We moved along an increasingly narrow canyon, passing beautifully banded cliffs, but were then stopped in our tracks by the increasingly sticky and deep mud. Our guide Vladimir suggested an alternative place, a viewpoint where we could see many coloured rocks and the snowy peaks of the Altin Emel range. So we traipsed back down the valley. Progress was halted for fifteen minutes as we watched a pair of competing toad-headed agamas with wonderful curly tails that were displaying and fighting. Back on the slopes we climbed to a series of ridges with commanding views, culminating in a magnificent panorama of rich-red ridges, pale grey hills and the snowy mountains beyond. It had been a stunning morning and more vistas revealed themselves as we returned to the cars for lunch.

In the afternoon we visited first some contorted magma formations at Katatau and then a superb and gigantic 700-year-old willow, which seemed to have spread across a large area suckering huge trees as it went. Vladimir had a moment of astrophysical headspinning, which we found hard to equate with a willow!



Day 20

24 June – Altin Emel and to Almaty

Our last day in the wilds of Central Asia and after a short delay we set off for the Singing Dune, an eighty-metre high elegantly shaped barkan dune, that on a good day hums a tune. It was a stiff hike to the summit where there were fine views of the Ile River and landscape beyond. Bushes of a *Stellera* grew amid the dried stems of an *Eremurus* and *Iris songaricus*. Unfortunately we had not been given permission to travel through the park entailing a two hundred kilometre detour. Lunch was taken on a hillside looking back towards Bashi with a few *Dracocephalum heterophyllum* on the slopes. We then drove along flower-lined roads stopping for *Alcea nudiflora*, which also gave us a chance to photograph the stunning drifts of *Salvia deserta* that seemed to dominate the flora here. The lost time was hard to make up and in the end the petroglyphs had to be sacrificed so as we could reach Almaty in good time.

It turned out to be the right move and we all had plenty of time to prepare for tomorrow as well as enjoy the benefit of wine and beers (instead of petroglyphs) and reflect on a very productive, eventful and enjoyable journey along the Celestial Mountains.

Day 21

25 June – Flights

The early flight meant a very early start, but we made it on time to Istanbul and then scattered to the four corners from whence we had come three weeks ago, but hopefully we would all reconvene somewhere else one day.



Salvia deserta



For information on our tours
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