

# Alpine Flowers of the Tien Shan

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

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### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	<u>Fly Almaty</u>
<b>Day 2</b>	<u>Train to Aksu Dzabagly</u>
<b>Day 3</b>	<u>Aksu Dzabagly</u>
<b>Day 4</b>	<u>Transfer to Ulken-Kaindy mountain</u>
<b>Day 5</b>	<u>Ulken-Kaindy Pass</u>
<b>Day 6</b>	<u>Bavdaksai</u>
<b>Day 7</b>	<u>Aksu Dzabagly</u>
<b>Day 8</b>	<u>Aksu Canyon. Train to Almaty</u>
<b>Day 9/11</b>	<u>Big Almaty Lake. Tien Shan</u>
<b>Day 12</b>	<u>Return to Almaty</u>
<b>Day 13</b>	<u>Fly London</u>

### Departs

June

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ01) or brochure

### Grading

B. A selection of botanical day walks of varying lengths, though the option to ride instead is sometimes available

### Focus

Plants

### Highlights

- Incredible high alpine meadow flowers among a wealth of botanical treasures
- Globe Flower & *Paraquilegia anemoides* among a wealth of exciting plant life
- Amazing scenery – high mountains, juniper forests & gorges
- Impressive birdlife includes Ibisbill & Himalayan Snowcock
- Led by an expert botanist guide
- Traditional Kazakhstan hospitality



*Viola altaica*



*Tien Shan Mountains*



*Himalayan Rubythroat courtesy of Colin Bradshaw*



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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, 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 unpopulated spaces. Great stone and sand deserts and wide grassy steppes occupy the majority of the country, interspersed with massive inland lakes such as Lake Balkash 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 the lowland steppe. It also feeds the great lakes and deltas to the north.

It is in these diverse habitats that we may hope to see a most exciting flora, including, at this time of year, a wonderful display of high meadow flowers and alpiners. There are also many mammals in the mountains; wolves, foxes, bears and porcupines, marmots, Siberian Ibex, Red Deer and Arkhar (Siberian sheep). The area is also home to many birds and butterflies.

### Day 1

Saturday

In Flight

We leave London on a scheduled flight bound for Almaty in Kazakhstan

### Day 2

Sunday

Almaty/Aksu Dzabagley

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. Later in the day we transfer to the railway station and board an overnight train for the journey east towards Uzbekistan. We have reserved comfortable sleeper berths for the journey and by the following daybreak will be deep in the heart of rural Kazakhstan.

### Day 3

Monday

Aksu Dzabagly

We will be met on arrival at the local railway station and will then drive by bus to Aksu Dzabagley, botanising on the way. For our first expedition we shall drive to the Koksai Gorge on the border with Kirghizia. We will walk over the feathergrass steppe with its yellow patches of Persian Rose, *Hultemia persica*. Here we may see Demoiselle Cranes and many butterflies, including Fritillaries and Satyrs. We will explore the rich plant life of the gorge which runs from the great triangular peak of Mt Manas.

We will arrive at our comfortable guest house in early evening to be welcomed by our hosts who will look after us during our stay. We will also meet our tour co leader Dr Anna Ivashenko, a leading authority on the plants of Central Asia. She will accompany us throughout our expedition.

There will be plenty of time to shower and settle into our rooms before dinner. The food throughout the tour is home cooked and delicious, with plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit. Our guest house is in the centre of the village at the foot of the Tien Shan mountains right on the edge of the Reserve and on the old Silk Route.

This is the oldest in Central Asia and was founded in 1927. It is in an area of mountains (ranging from 1000m to 4000m); meadows, gorges and rivers totalling 85,000 hectares

## Days 4 – 6

## Tuesday – Thursday

### Ulken – Kaindy

Today we make the journey to our most exciting destination the Ulken-Kaindy mountain house situated at an altitude of 2000m in the Reserve. Here we shall spend the next three nights. The house was originally built for Reserve scientists. Accommodation may also be in traditional Kazakh yurts. Here, too we shall have delicious food, similar to that in the Village below.

The mountain house overlooks magnificent scenery and there is every possibility of seeing Brown Bears from its windows. To reach it, we have the use of mountain ponies, and as riding will be a new experience or a forgotten memory for some, we will have plenty of help getting used to our mounts which are easy to handle and comfortable to ride.

Our track follows the Dzabagley River for part of the way, taking us through meadows studded with juniper and birch, with pink spikes of *Morina kokanica* and the white flowering rose *Rosa fedtschenkoana*. Our baggage will be brought up by 4WD trucks.

During our stay here we shall set out each morning to explore a different habitat. Transport will again be a mixture of walking and ponies.

The upland meadows will be bright with Delphiniums, many species of Allium, *Pedicularis* spp. louseworts, *Eremostachys* *Eremostachys tienshanica*, a tall yellow labiate, a bright blue teasel, *Dipsacus azureus* and several campanulas. On damp alpine slopes we shall see *Codonopsis clematidea*, a beautiful member of the Campanula family and a native of the Himalaya and the Tien Shan mountains. Along the streams we shall see the globe flower *Trollius altaicus*, with its large orange yellow flowers; and *Aquilegia atrovinosa*, a dark wine coloured columbine. On our visits to the high mountain passes we will look for the native edelweiss *Leontopodium ochroleucum*, Gentians, Saxifrages, the bright yellow poppy *Papaver croceum*, and, most exciting of all, the beautiful *Paraquilegia anemonoides*.

During all our expeditions we shall be on the look out for Red Deer, Arkhar Siberian Sheep, Siberian Ibex, marmots, the rich bird life and many butterflies.

**Day 7****Friday****Aksu Dzabagley**

Today we must retrace our steps and ride back to Aksu Dzabagley Village. We will enjoy again the magnificent mountain scenery and the view below of our village surrounded by meadows. We say goodbye to our ponies and complete the last short lap by bus.

**Day 8****Saturday****Aksu Dzabagley & Aksu River Canyon**

In the morning we drive by bus up the steep road to the Aksu Gorge, stopping to botanise on the way. We shall picnic above the gorge, watching for Golden Eagles, Lammageiers and Griffon Vultures. Growing from the cliffs we shall see the dark pink umbels of *Primula minkwitziae*, and further down, the tall red spikes of *Ungernia severzowii*.

We will also come across *Dictamnus angustifolius*, the Burning Bush plant. Later in the day we embark on the return train journey to Almaty

**Days 9 - 11****Sunday – Tuesday****Astronomical Observatory**

On arrival back in Almaty we stay in the city only long enough to freshen up before boarding a four-wheel drive vehicle to take us high into the mountains which tower over the former capital. An old Russian astronomical observatory is situated on the slopes of one such mountain and this will be our destination for the last few days of the tour. Sadly lacking in finance for the scientific work the observatory is now somewhat ramshackle and in need of attention but guests are given a very warm welcome and the simple but comfortable guest accommodation is ideally situated for relatively easy access to glorious flower filled meadows. Forests of Tien Shan Spruce and patches of Turkestan Juniper extend above the alpine meadows whilst below the carpet of flowers lies the Bolshoy Almaty Lake which is actually a reservoir which boasts nesting Ibisbills on its stoney shoreline. This area is a botanical paradise and we are likely to find many species not encountered at Aksu Dzabagly.

The lower mountain slopes are covered with such deciduous scrub as *Lonicera*, *Rosa* and *Cotoneaster*, plus the rare endemic *Atraphaxis muschketovii*. Higher up *Malus sieversii* and *Armeniaca vulgaris*, a mass of blooming *Polemanium coeruleum*, *Aconitum leucostomum*, *Polygonum coriariuncoriarium* and *Eremurus robustus* may all be found. The forests of the beautiful, candle-like Tien Shan Spruce harbour the local orchid *Goodyera repens*, as well as the endemic *Erysimum croceum*, whilst a variety of species of *Aconitum*, *Geranium*, *Primula*, *Viola* and *Aquilegia* blossom at the forest edges. By the rivers grow *Cortusa brotheri*, *Parnassia laxmannii* and *Dactylorhiza umbrosa*.

Higher up, in the subalpine zone, the creeping Turkestanic Juniper is the most characteristic plant. Here the flowers are simply stunning and include spectacular and very large Globeflowers (*Trollius Trollius altaicus* and *T. sibiricus*), *Dracocephalum grandiflorum*, *Anemone protracta*, *Hedysarum neglectum*, *Primula algida* and *Schmalhausenia nidulans*, to mention but a few. The alpine belt is another revelation, with species like *Dryadante tertrandra*, *Rhodiola coccinea*, *Pyrethrum leotopodium*, *Macrotomia euchroma*, *Paraquilegia grandiflora* and innumerable *Astragalus*, *Pedicularis*, *Potentilla*, *Gentiana* and *Oxytropis*.

The area also supports abundant alpine birdlife. Species such as Brown and Black-throated Accentors, Himalayan Rubythroats, Hume's Yellow-browed and Sulphur-bellied Warblers, Severtzov's Tit-warblers, Red-mantled Rosefinches and White-winged Grosbeaks may all be found in the juniper scrub whilst in the forests of Tien Shan Spruce, Oriental Turtle Dove, Blue-headed and Eversmann's Redstarts, Songar Tits, Crossbills and Red-fronted Serins breed.

## Day 12

Wednesday

### Almaty

On arrival in Almaty there will be time for relaxation before travelling to the airport to check-in for the return flight to London departing early the following morning.

## Day 13

Thursday

### In Flight

Today we arrive back in London.

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## Grading

Grade B – C. To reach some of our mountain destinations, we will use a mixture of riding ponies and walking. We cover 3-6 miles a day and there are some steep paths. Although our pace is leisurely you will need to be reasonably fit. The highest altitude we reach is 3300m.

## Weather

It is likely to be warm and sunny, but cool in the evenings. There is always the possibility of sudden thunderstorms.

## Clothing

Light clothes during the day (including trousers for riding) and something warm for mornings and evenings. Most important, wet weather clothing.

## Food & accommodation

All accommodation and meals are included in the cost of this holiday. We spend 2 nights in the guest house in Aksu Dzabagley and 3 nights in the mountain house or roomy Kazakh yurts, with facilities for evening showers.

The Old Observatory, where we spend 3 nights provides simple but comfortable accommodation. There is a sauna in the Guest House.

## Extra expenses

Allow £30 for tips, personal purchases etc.

## 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.