

Alpine Flowers of the Tien Shan

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Almaty</u>
Day 2	<u>Kaskelen National Park</u>
Day 3	<u>Fly Shymkent; Aksu-Zhabagly Village</u>
Day 4 – 6	<u>Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve – daily excursions in the mountains</u>
Day 7	<u>Aksu-Zhabagly village</u>
Day 8	<u>Aksu-Zhabagly village – Almaty</u>
Day 9 – 12	<u>Almaty – daily excursions in the Tien Shan mountains</u>
Day 13	<u>Fly London</u>

Departs

June

Focus

General Natural History

Grading

Grade B – A selection of botanical day walks of varying lengths, though the option to ride a horse/pony instead is sometimes available

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code KAZ01) or brochure

Highlights

- Incredible high alpine meadow flowers among a wealth of botanical treasures
- *Tulipa kaufmanniana* & *Paraquilegia anemoides* among a wealth of exciting plant life



From Top: *Viola altaica*, *Chorispora bungeana* & *Rhodiola kirilowii*



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Introduction

Kazakhstan, lying at the heart of Central Asia, is a massive country spanning over 2,700,000 square kilometres, from the Caspian Sea to Western China, an area the size of Western Europe! Yet, with a population of just 18 million people, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open vistas 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 border stand the mighty Tien Shan Mountains, the 1,000 mile spine of Central Asia and the northern extension of the great Himalaya. These spectacular snow-capped peaks are clothed in flower-filled alpine meadows and lush forests of Tien Shan Spruce whilst at their feet lie vast lowland steppes stretching as far as the eye can see.

It is within these varied habitats that we hope to find an exciting and diverse range of flora, including a wonderful display of high meadow flowers and alpine. The birdlife is equally diverse and we will also be on the lookout for mammals including Grey Marmot and Siberian Ibex.



NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & 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.

Day 1

Fly Almaty, Kazakhstan

We leave London's Heathrow Airport on a scheduled Turkish Airlines flight bound for Almaty in Kazakhstan via a change of aircraft in Istanbul.

Day 2

Kaskelen National Park

We arrive at Almaty's modern international airport around 04:30 hours and transfer to the nearby Kaskelen National Park. Here we'll wander through the rolling hills in search of Brown Dipper, Meadow Bunting, and enjoy splendid meadows blanketed with wildflowers. Later, we return to the city to exchange local currency and take care of a few small conveniences before the journey officially begins. In the evening, we gather for a welcome dinner in Almaty, followed by a good night's rest before the start of our adventure.

Overnight: Almaty

Day 3

Fly Shymkent - Aksu-Zhabagly Village

We depart Almaty and board the domestic flight taking us to Shymkent from where drive by bus to the Aksu-Zhabagly village in the Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve, botanising on the way. For our first expedition we shall drive to the Koksai Gorge close to the border with Kyrgyzstan. Here we will walk over the feathergrass steppe with its yellow patches of Persian Rose, *Hulthemia persica*, looking for the rich variety of flowers that grow here such as *Brassica elongate*, *Handelia trichophilla* and *Gentiana olivieri*. Red-headed Buntings and Calandra Larks are common, whilst over the sides of the rugged conglomerate cliffs of the canyon soar Egyptian Vultures. There will be plenty of butterflies on the wing too, including a variety of fritillaries and satyrs.



Overnight: Shymkent

Days 4 – 6

Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve

Today we make the journey to our most exciting destination, the Ulken-Kaindy mountain house situated at an altitude of 2,000 metres in the Aksu-Zhabagly Reserve. This will be our home for the next three nights. The house is set within the most dramatic of scenery and was originally built for reserve scientists. Accommodation here is very simple and maybe either in the main building or in Kazakh yurts. The food will be delicious – home cooked and traditional.

During our stay here we shall set out each morning to explore a different habitat. Transport will be a mixture of walking, and 4-wheel drive vehicles.

The upland meadows and rocky slopes surrounding the Mountain House should be dotted with a kaleidoscope of colours from the rich assemblage of plants in flower in June. We can admire a host of delphiniums, many species of *allium*, *Pedicularis* spp. louseworts, *Eremostachys tienshanica* (a tall yellow labiate), the bright blue teasel, *Dipsacus azureus* and several species of *campanula*. On damp alpine slopes we will look for *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 Globeflower *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*.



Siberian Ibex

During all our expeditions we shall be on the lookout for Red Deer, Arkhar Siberian Sheep, Grey Marmots and the rich birdlife such as Himalayan Snowcock, Lammergeier, White-winged Grosbeak and Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush.

Overnight: Aksu-Zhabagly Reserve

Day 7

Aksu-Zhabagly village

Today we must slowly retrace our steps and return back to our guesthouse in Aksu-Zhabagly village. We will again be able to enjoy the magnificent mountain scenery as we descend back to the village botanising and looking for other wildlife enroute.

Overnight: Shymkent

Day 8

Aksu-Zhabagly village – Almaty

This will be our final day exploring the Aksu-Zhabagly Reserve. In the morning we drive up the steep road to the Aksu Gorge, stopping to botanise on the way. We will have our picnic above the gorge, watching for Golden Eagles, Lammergeier and Griffon Vultures. Growing from the cliffs should see the dark pink umbels of *Primula minkwitziae*, and further down, the tall red spikes of *Ungernia severzowii* and *Dictamnus angustifolius*, the Burning Bush plant. Later in the day we return to Shymkent to catch the domestic flight back to Almaty.

Overnight: Almaty

Days 9 – 12

Almaty – Tien Shan Mountains

On arrival back in Almaty we head high into the mountains which tower over Kazakhstan's former capital. Forests of Tien Shan Spruce and patches of Turkestan Juniper extend up to the alpine meadows, whilst below the carpet of flowers lies Big Almaty Lake which is actually a reservoir and boasts nesting Ibisbills along its stoney shoreline. This area is a botanist's paradise and we are likely to find many species not encountered earlier in the tour.



Tulipa heterophylla

The lower mountain slopes are covered with deciduous scrub such 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 *Dactylorrhiza 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 altaicus* and *Trollius 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 *Dryadanthe 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, Redmantled 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 and Redfronted Serins breed. We will spend the next three nights in a comfortable guest house near the entrance gate of the park. We will drive up daily for our expeditions.

Overnight: Almaty

Day 13

Fly London

Today we will fly from Almaty airport back to London.

Tour Grading

Grade B – To reach some of our mountain destinations, we cover 3-6 miles each day and there are some steep and rocky paths. Although our pace is leisurely you will need to be reasonably fit, and enjoy walking, to get the most out of this holiday. The highest altitude we reach is around 3,300 metres, and there will be overnights at 2,000m

Weather

It is likely to be warm and sunny for much of our stay, but cooler in the evenings and early mornings. Mountain weather is notoriously fickle, however, and temperatures will drop markedly if the cloud rolls in, especially at high altitude. There is also the possibility of the occasional afternoon thunderstorms. You should therefore pack for all eventualities.

Food & accommodation

All accommodation and meals are included in the cost of this holiday, starting with breakfast on Day 2 and ending with breakfast on Day 13. We spend two nights in a simple guest house in Aksu-Zhabagly and three nights in the mountain house or roomy Kazakh yurts, with facilities for evening showers. Please be aware that there is a very limited choice of places to stay in rural Kazakhstan and the accommodation that is on offer is of a simpler nature than that available in other regions of the world. Bathroom facilities are also often shared.

For our three nights in the Tien Shan Mountains we stay in a comfortable chalet-style guesthouse and in Almaty we base ourselves in a modern city hotel.

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, 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.