

The Tulip Meadows of Kazakhstan's Steppes & Tien Shan Mountains

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Almaty
Day 2	Almaty area
Day 3 – 4	Merke and Merke Gorge
Day 5 – 8	Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve
Day 9	Kyzylkol Lake
Day 10	Turkistan; Fly to Almaty
Day 11	Charyn Canyon and Bartogay Lake
Day 12	Kaskelen Gorge
Day 13	Inbound flights

Departs

April

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code KAZ04)

Grading

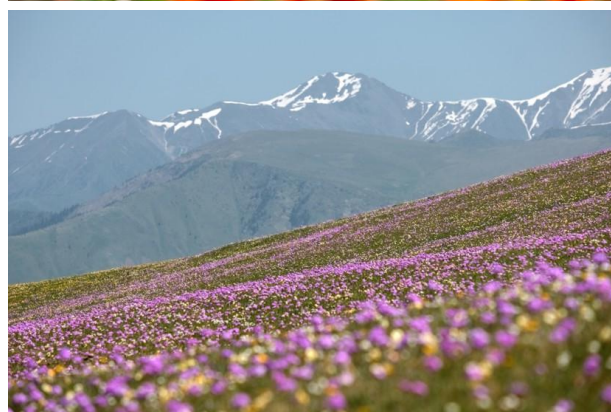
Grade B. Day walks only.

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
- Led by a botanical guide



From Top: *Tulipa greigii*, alpine meadow, poppies and tulips field.



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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 over 19 million, mostly living in the cities, this is a land of vast open and unpeopled 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 1,610-kilometre 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.



Tien Shan Mountains

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.

Day 1

In Flight

If using the group flights, today we depart London on a scheduled service flight to Almaty (Kazakhstan's modern former capital city), usually with a connection through Istanbul.

Day 2

Almaty area

After arriving at Almaty Airport, we depart north towards the Kapchagai region to find *Tulipa buhseana*, *Tulipa kolpakowskiana*, and *Tulipa behmiana*. We will also encounter other interesting plants of the semi-desert zone, including *Iris tenuifolia*, *Vicia subvillosa*, *Spiraea hypericifolia*, *Atraphaxis replicata*, *Rindera tetraspis*, *Fritillaria karelinii*, *Astragalus lanuginosus*, and *Tragopogon ruber*, as well as various ephemeral plants.

We will enjoy a picnic lunch in the field and continue our exploration by visiting the Sholak Mountains in search of a good population of the yellow-flowered *Tulipa albertii*. In the early evening, we return to Almaty and check in to our comfortable hotel after a wonderful first day in Kazakhstan.

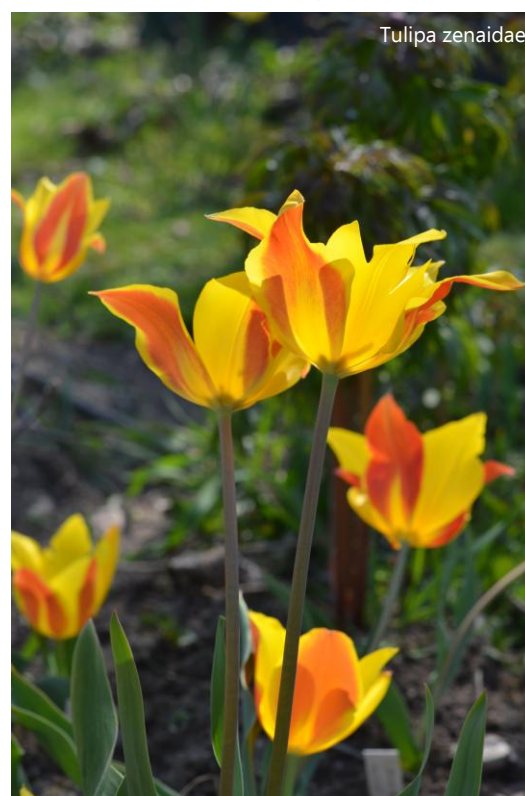
Overnight: Almaty

Day 3 – 4

Merke and Merke Gorge

Today we journey to Merke with some glorious botanical stops en route. A picnic lunch will be taken at the Kurdai Pass. Here we should find the endangered Berberis relative, *Leontice ewersmannii* with its showy yellow flowers and distinctive divided glaucous foliage. This site is a tulipophile's delight as we should encounter *T.kolpakowskiana*, *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 as a couple of iris species and *Astragalus skorniakowii*. En route, we may observe large numbers of Demoiselle Cranes on their northward migration and we will stop to enjoy these if they are feeding in the fields. We must now continue our journey to Merke where we stay at a simple but en suite and well-located base for exploring the surrounding foothills.

The following day will be one of local botanising with little travelling. Merke Gorge is situated in the Kirghiz Alatau mountain range. The steep slopes of Merke are covered by dark green clumps of ferns (*Ceterach 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, *Tulipa zenaidae*, an endemic species of Kirghiz Alatau. The region is rich with other plants, including *Iris orchioides* and *Megacarpaea orbiculata*.



Tulipa zenaidae

After lunch, we journey towards the Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve, and en route we should observe local bird species, such as Masked Wagtail and Pied Wheatear. On arrival, we will check in to a simple but comfortable guesthouse where rooms are en suite and where we will be based for the next five nights.

Overnight: Merke

Day 5 – 8

Aksu-Zhabagly

Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve is the oldest in Central Asia having been established in 1927. Our first full day in the reserve will include a 5km walk through its stunning landscapes. Here we can find tulips, including



Tulipa kaufmanniana, *Tulipa greigii*, and *Tulipa turkestanica*. The reserve is also home to rare plants such as *Pedicularis olgae*, *Iris willmottiana*, and *Fritillaria sewerzowii*.

The following day we dedicate to exploring Aksu Canyon, well known for its unrivalled density of Greig's Tulips, with 20-40 flowering individuals in a square metre and a dramatic landscape where the soaring Himalayan Griffon Vultures can be seen overhead! Our walk

along the riverbanks will reveal *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and *Tulipa greigii*, and a diverse array of other plants such as *Eremurus lactiflorus* and *Juno willmottiana*. The descent to the river will offer incredible views and plenty of botanical treasures, while Blue-capped Redstarts accompany us along the way.

The next day we journey into Berkara Gorge, a rich environment where we will walk the trail to find the multi-coloured forms of *Tulipa greigii*, including yellow, red, and sometimes nearly white varieties. It is also possible to encounter hybrids with *Tulipa kaufmanniana* at this location. On Kuyuk Lane, we will observe the *Tulipa orthopoda*. Other notable plants in this area include *Pyrus regelii*, *Prangos pabularia*, *Bungea vesiculifera*, *Fraxinus sogdiana*, and *Populus berkarensis*. The gorge is also renowned as a breeding hotspot for the stunning Indian Paradise Flycatcher.

On our final full day in the area, we will explore the picturesque Red Gorge. Among the ploughed fields rises Krasnaya Gorka, named for the abundance of *Tulipa greigii* in the area. The nearby Mashat Canyon is the ideal habitat for the endemic *Tulipa lemmersii*, although we will only find it in fruit during this visit, we can also observe more *Tulipa kaufmanniana* and *Tulipa greigii*. Other notable plants in the region include *Prunus spinosissima*, *Calophaca tianschanica*, *Allium karataviense*, *Atraphaxis pyrifolia*, and *Astragalus sieversianus*.

Overnights: Aksu-Zhabagly Nature Reserve

Day 9

Kyzylkol Lake, Shymkent

We will make an early start today to visit Kyzylkol Lake, a saltlake with variegated clay outcrops along its banks. This is the only location where we can find *Tulipa borszczowii*, which features predominantly red flowers with a black base. In this unique habitat, we will encounter a variety of other interesting plants, including *Leontice incerta*, *Anabasis truncata*, *Zygophyllum*, 3-4 species of *Astragalus*, *Ferula foetida*, and *Tamarix laxa*.

In the afternoon we will drive to Turkistan where we will spend the night before exploring the city the following day.

Overnight: Turkistan



Day 10

Kyzylkol Lake, Shymkent

This morning we set out for exploration of the city of Turkistan, including a cultural visit to the magnificent Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, one of the most important spiritual and historical sites in Central Asia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Built in the 14th century under Timur, this impressive structure is renowned for its grand scale, turquoise domes, and intricate tilework. We will take time to explore its complexities, learn about its significance in the Islamic world, and experience the unique atmosphere of this pilgrimage site.

Later in the afternoon we will board our flight to Almaty, where we will check in to our comfortable hotel for our final three nights.

Overnight: Almaty

Day 11

Charyn Canyon and Bartogay Lake

Our penultimate day enjoys a full day exploring the Charyn Canyon and Bartogay Lake region. We will take several shorter walks to find *Tulipa tetraphylla*. Other notable finds include *Allium galanthum*, *Rheum tataricum*, *Neuroloma beketovii*, *Zygophyllum rosowii*, *Arnebia guttata*, and *Nonea capsica*. Birdwatching will also be excellent, as we look for species like Little Bustards and White-crowned Penduline Tits.

Overnight: Almaty

Day 12

Kaskelen Gorge

On our last full day in Central Asia, we will visit the Kaskelen Gorge, where variegated populations of *Tulipa ostrowskiana* bloom beneath the majestic Tien Shan Mountains. Within this outstanding nature reserve, with the stunning snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan as

our backdrop, we will enjoy gentle forays of 3km. In addition to *Tulipa ostrowskiana*, we hope to encounter other notable plants, including *Prunus armeniaca*, *Acer semenovii*, *Euphorbia yaroslavii*, *Iris albertii*, and *Caragana camilli-schneideri*. This day offers a final opportunity to experience the awe-inspiring flora of Kazakhstan.

Overnight: Almaty

Day 13

Inbound flights

We will enjoy a private transfer to Almaty International Airport for our return flights, bringing our botanical adventure to an end.

Grading

This is primarily a straightforward botany tour. However, much of our botanising will be carried out on foot, and during our stay at Aksu-Zhabagly in particular, we will 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 5 and 9 kilometres in a day. No trekking or great hardship are involved, but we will certainly be maximising our time in the region by spending the best part of the day in the field, with relatively little time spent at the hotels themselves.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals, starting with breakfast on Day 2 and ending with dinner on Day 11, 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. The rest of the holiday we use simple, comfortable hotels; generally, the best available in the areas we visit, and en suite throughout.

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.

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.

