



SPECIALITY

ASIA & MIDDLE EAST · RECOMMENDED 15 DAYS

★
Song-Kul lake

Kyrgyzstan

Yurts, horses and heavenly mountains: nomad country in summer, at your own pace

RECOMMENDED LENGTH

15 days

DEPARTURE

Any day

you pick the dates

TRANSPORT

Self-drive

or private driver

ESTIMATED FROM, EXCL.
FLIGHT**€1,940** p.p.

My recommended route: an active private trip through the Tien Shan, the Heavenly Mountains. Hike in Ala-Archa and to the Altyn-Arashan hot springs, travel around vast Lake Issyk-Kul and ride horses at Song-Kul, sleeping in yurts with herding families. You choose: a 4x4 with a private driver, or driving a rental 4x4 yourself.

✓ Put together personally

✓ No group travel

✓ At your own pace

✓ Leave out or add what you like

✓ Dates completely free

✓ Eat wherever you like

Highlights

- ★ Two nights in a yurt at mountain lake Song-Kul (3,016 m)
- ★ Horse riding across alpine pastures with a local horseman, beginners welcome
- ★ Hiking to the Altyn-Arashan hot springs
- ★ The red rocks of Jeti-Oguz and Skazka canyon
- ★ Eagle hunter and felt makers: living nomad heritage
- ★ Ala-Archa National Park near Bishkek
- ★ The vast Lake Issyk-Kul, with a private driver or driving your own 4x4

Best time to travel

JAN FEB MAR APR MAY JUN JUL AUG SEP OCT NOV DEC

best time to travel: advice only, you travel when you like

TRAVELLERS

Private: only your own party, from 1 traveller. No group travel, no fellow travellers you don't know.

LENGTH

Recommended: 15 days · shorter or longer is always possible

DATES

Completely flexible: you leave on the day that suits you.

Your route on the map



- 1 Bishkek**
3 nights · day 2–3, 14
- 2 Cholpon-Ata**
1 night · day 4
- 3 Karakol**
3 nights · day 5, 7–8
- 4 Altyn-Arashan (yurt camp)**
1 night · day 6
- 5 South shore of Issyk-Kul (yurt camp)**
1 night · day 9
- 6 Kochkor (homestay)**
1 night · day 10
- 7 Naryn**
1 night · day 11
- 8 Song-Kul (yurt)**
2 nights · day 12–13

--- overland, arrow = direction of travel
--- on foot day trip

Map: Natural Earth (public domain) · the arcs show the order of the route, not the exact road



DAY 6 The Arashan river winding through the Altyn-Arashan valley



DAY 9 Red rock spires in Skazka (Fairy-tale) canyon

My recommended route

This is the route as I put it together for you. It is a starting point, not a fixed programme: leave out what doesn't appeal to you, add what you would like to do and travel at your own pace. Everything below is arranged for you in advance.

DAY 1

Departure to Bishkek VLEGTUIG

Evening flight from Brussels via Istanbul to Bishkek. Night on board. You choose your own start date within the season (mid-June to mid-September); book the flight yourself or let me arrange it.

DAY 2

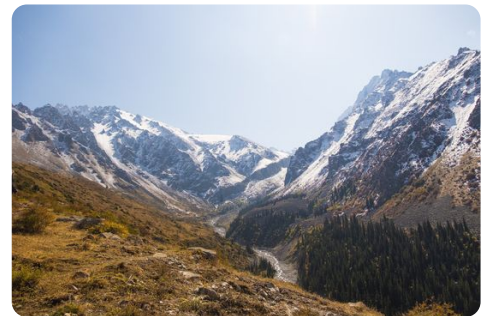
Arrival in Bishkek BISHKEK

Early-morning arrival. A private driver meets you in the arrivals hall with a name sign and takes you to your hotel (room available immediately, early check-in included). After some rest you stroll at your own pace past the Soviet-era boulevards, Ala-Too Square and the colourful Osh Bazaar, and you receive a local SIM card. Free evening; I send you my addresses for plov and lagman.

DAY 3

Hiking in Ala-Archa BISHKEK • BREAKFAST

Barely an hour from the capital lies Ala-Archa National Park, with glaciated peaks near 5,000 m. With a private driver: your driver picks you up at the hotel and stays with you for the whole trip from today. Self-drive: your 4x4 is delivered to the hotel in the morning, with a briefing on the car, the route and the satellite communicator. You hike at your own pace to the Ak-Sai waterfall (approx. 5–6h return, 1,000 m ascent, shorter option available) as good acclimatisation. Bring a picnic for the valley: I'll tell you where to buy the best samsa and bread in Bishkek.



Snow-capped peaks in Ala-Archa National Park

DAY 4

Burana and the north shore of Issyk-Kul CHOLPON-ATA • BREAKFAST

Heading east, stop at the Burana Tower, remnant of a Silk Road city, with its balbal stone grave markers. Through the Boom Gorge to the vast mountain lake of Issyk-Kul. In Cholpon-Ata see petroglyphs over 2,000 years old. Approx. 4h on a good tarmac road, with your driver or behind the wheel yourself. In the evening you eat wherever you like: I send you my addresses in Cholpon-Ata.

DAY 5

Karakol: Dungan mosque and Russian church KARAKOL • BREAKFAST

Along the north shore to Karakol (approx. 2h30). Visit the pagoda-style wooden Dungan mosque built without a single nail, and the wooden Holy Trinity Cathedral. Taste ashlan-fu, the town's cold noodle soup.



The colourful wooden Dungan mosque in Karakol

DAY 6

Trek to Altyn-Arashan ALTYN-ARASHAN (YURTKAMP) • BREAKFAST • DINNER

You hike through a forested valley to the Altyn-Arashan hot springs at 2,600 m (approx. 14 km, 5–6h, approx. 900 m ascent). A mountain guide is not required: the trail follows the river and is well marked. Your luggage goes in a Soviet 6x6 truck, which you can also ride yourself if you prefer not to walk. Your own vehicle stays in the valley: your driver waits there, or your rental car is left in guarded parking (the track up is not allowed for rental cars). Evening soak in the hot springs beneath Palatka peak, followed by dinner at the yurt camp.

DAY 7

Jeti-Oguz, the Seven Bulls KARAKOL • BREAKFAST

Morning walk around the springs, then a relaxed hike back down the valley. In the afternoon to the red rocks of Jeti-Oguz: the 'Seven Bulls' and the 'Broken Heart'. Short hike at your own pace into the Kök-Jaiyk 'valley of flowers' with glacier views.



Horses beneath the red rocks of Jeti-Oguz

DAY 8

At your own pace: Karakol and the alpine meadows of Jyrgalan KARAKOL ♦ BREAKFAST

After two days of trekking, a day without alarm clock or packing: you stay another night in the same guesthouse. Around 9.30 drive approx. 1h15 (the last kilometres on gravel) to the Jyrgalan valley, a former mining village that has reinvented itself as a hiking village. No steep forested valley this time, but wide, rolling alpine meadows with grazing horse herds and the snowy peaks of the Terskey Ala-Too on the horizon. You take an easy walk on waymarked trails to the K  k-Bel waterfall or the viewpoint above Turnaly-Kol lake (approx. 6–10 km, 3–4h, little climbing; you decide on the spot what your legs still fancy). Rather ride? Then swap your hiking boots for a calm horse with a horseman. For lunch I recommend a host family in the village; you pay on the spot. The afternoon is free: a warm soak at the Ak-Suu hot springs, the Przhevalsky museum and memorial at Pristan on the lake shore, or simply a caf   terrace in Karakol. Does your day fall on a Sunday? Then head to Karakol's animal market before breakfast, where farmers trade horses, fat-tailed sheep and cattle between 5 and 10 am. For the evening I send you my addresses in Karakol.

DAY 9

The south shore: fairy-tale canyon and eagle hunters ZUIDOEVER ISSYK-KUL (YURTKAMP) ♦ BREAKFAST • DINNER

Along the quieter south shore of Issyk-Kul (approx. 3h driving, tarmac). Walk at your own pace through the red rock formations of Skazka ('fairy-tale') canyon. In Bokonbaevo a berkutchi (eagle hunter) gives you a private demonstration of hunting with his golden eagle. Dinner and night in a lakeside yurt camp, with a bracing swim for the brave.



Lake Issyk-Kul with the Tien Shan on the horizon

DAY 10

Kochkor: felt and homestays KOCHKOR (GASTGEZIN) ♦ BREAKFAST

Drive to Kochkor (approx. 2h30), cradle of community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan. At a women's cooperative learn how shyrdaks, traditional felt carpets, are made. Overnight with a host family or in a guesthouse, depending on your level. Self-drivers fill up here before the mountains.

DAY 11

Over the Dolon pass to Naryn, hiking in Salkyn-Tor NARYN ♦ BREAKFAST

A short drive of approx. 2h on tarmac over the Dolon pass (3,030 m) to Naryn, the provincial town on the river of the same name at about 2,000 m: a good stepping stone before you go higher. Self-drivers fill up here once more, as there is no fuel between Naryn and Kochkor via Song-Kul. After lunch drive approx. 20 minutes east through the Naryn gorge to Salkyn-Tor National Park, on the forested northern slope of the Naryn-Too range. There you hike at your own pace up the valley along the river, through Schrenk spruce and wild roses (approx. 3h return, turn back wherever you like; offline map and entrance included). With some luck you spot a maral, the Tien Shan deer the park is helping to bring back. In the evening a stroll past Naryn's bazaar and blue mosque.



DAY 12 Yurt camp on the shore of Song-Kul lake



DAY 12 The hairpin bends of the Moldo-Ashuu pass



DAY 12 Herders' yurts on the summer pastures of Song-Kul

DAY 12

Over the Moldo-Ashuu pass to Song-Kul SONG-KUL (YURT) • BREAKFAST • DINNER

West along the Naryn river, then up the spectacular hairpins of the Moldo-Ashuu pass (3,346 m) to the high lake of Song-Kul at 3,016 m (approx. 3h30 driving, the last hours on gravel). Self-drive: this is the most technical driving day; in bad weather you take the easier way via Kochkor, and I follow you by WhatsApp. In the afternoon you settle into your yurt with a herding family and walk down to the lake shore. If you like, ride along with the herders at sunset as they bring the herd in. At the yurt camp all meals are included. Night in a yurt.

DAY 13

A full day on horseback with the nomads of Song-Kul SONG-KUL (YURT) • BREAKFAST • LUNCH • DINNER

A full day at the pace of the summer pastures. With a local horseman you ride (approx. 5–6h with a picnic from the camp, gentle pace, no experience required) along the shore and over the ridges above the lake, to the summer camps of other herding families. Prefer to walk? Then you hike across the alpine meadows with the horseman as your guide to a viewpoint high above the lake, and the horses carry the picnic. Back at camp taste kumys (fermented mare's milk) and help bake boorsok bread. At night one of Central Asia's finest starry skies.

DAY 14

Over the Kalmak-Ashuu pass back to Bishkek BISHKEK • BREAKFAST

Farewell to the herders and down over the Kalmak-Ashuu pass (3,446 m, gravel road) to Kochkor, then on tarmac through the Boom Gorge back to Bishkek (approx. 6h driving, the first 2h30 on gravel). Self-drivers hand back the 4x4 at the hotel. For your last evening I recommend a farewell dinner with live music on the komuz, the three-string lute: I'm happy to reserve a table for you, and you pay on the spot.

DAY 15

Return flight

A private driver picks you up at the hotel and drops you at the airport for the early flight via Istanbul to Brussels, arriving the same day.

What I arrange for you

- Airport pickup**
At Manas airport in Bishkek a private driver meets you in the arrivals hall with a name sign, including for the usual early-morning arrival; your room is available immediately. On the last day a driver picks you up at the hotel and drops you at the airport, also if you have been driving yourself (you hand back the rental car at the hotel the evening before).
- Hotels**
Every night is booked and confirmed in advance, at the level you choose: Budget, Comfort or Premium. Prefer another hotel? I change it.
- Transport**
You choose: self-drive with a rental car waiting for you, or a private driver and private transfers. Domestic flights, trains and boats where they make sense, all booked in advance.
- Activities, at your pace**
The activities and entrance tickets on the route. No guide or group travels with you: you set the pace, and anything you would rather skip, you simply leave out.
- Eat wherever you like**
Breakfast is included, as are the meals at remote camps and lodges where there is no alternative. For the rest I give you my restaurant tips, but you are completely free to choose where you eat. I never send you somewhere because it earns me something.

Estimated prices per person

PER PERSON, BASED ON 2 TRAVELLERS, EXCL. INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT

ACCOMMODATION LEVEL	Self-drive rental car, everything pre-booked	Private driver private transfers and driver
Budget simple, clean and well located	€1,940 p.p.	€2,770 p.p.
Comfort characterful mid-range	€2,270 p.p.	€3,100 p.p.
Premium the best addresses on the ground	€2,740 p.p.	€3,570 p.p.

WITH 4 TRAVELLERS

approx. 28% off per person: you share the car and driver. E.g. Comfort, private driver: approx. €2,230 p.p.

TRAVELLING SOLO

supplement of approx. 84%: you carry the room and transport alone. E.g. Comfort, private driver: approx. €5,705 p.p.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHT

I book your flight as part of your trip; the flight price for your dates is in your personal quote. Return flight Brussels–Bishkek not included: allow about € 480–850 p.p. depending on the month (June is usually cheaper than July). I find you the best flight with your quote.

SELF-DRIVE

Self-drive is possible, and it is an adventure for keen, experienced drivers. You get a sturdy 4x4 with full insurance, delivered to and collected from your hotel in Bishkek (round trip, so no one-way fee), with offline maps and a satellite communicator. Fuel is paid locally (indicative price ± €200 per vehicle for the whole route; there are no toll roads). The main roads are tarmac, but the passes to and from Song-Kul (Kalmak-Ashuu and Moldo-Ashuu) are gravel roads above 3,300 m with hairpins, livestock on the road and few signposts. Traffic drives on the right; bring your Belgian licence and an International Driving Permit. The track to Altyn-Arashan is done on foot or in the 6x6 truck. The outing to Jyrgalan on day 8 (approx. 1h15, the last stretch on a good gravel road) is an easy drive on a public road the rental contract allows; like the Altyn-Arashan track, the Karakol gorge beyond the last bridge and the Ak-Suu gorge beyond the sanatorium are off limits for rental cars. In doubt? Choose the private driver.

WITH A PRIVATE DRIVER

With the private driver you have one regular, experienced Kyrgyz driver with a 4x4 from day 3 to day 14; fuel and his board and lodging are included. He knows the passes, the yurt camps and the families along the way, and stops wherever you like. Most drivers speak Russian and basic English: if you want more explanation somewhere, a local guide can join, and I am reachable by WhatsApp. On your riding day at Song-Kul he stays at the camp.

ESTIMATED PRICES

Estimated prices: per person, based on 2 travellers sharing a room, excl. international flight, estimated from desk research (2027 price level). The binding price is the one in your personal proposal and booking confirmation.

Estimated price. In high season the price can be higher, in low season lower; your exact price is in your personal quote.

Three accommodation levels

Budget

Clean, well-reviewed guesthouses and homestays with breakfast, a simple hotel in Bishkek and yurt camps with shared facilities. Indicative price approx. €20–50 per room or yurt per night.

Comfort

A good 3–4* hotel in Bishkek, the best guesthouses and small hotels with private bathroom, and the better yurt camps (your own yurt, clean shower blocks). Indicative price approx. €60–100 per room or yurt per night.

Premium

The best available in the towns: one of Bishkek's best hotels, a lake-view apartment in Cholpon-Ata and the best hotels in Karakol and Naryn. In the mountains (Altyn-Arashan, the south shore, Kochkor and Song-Kul) you stay in the same yurt camps and guesthouse as in Comfort: luxury in the mountains stays simple. Indicative price approx. €100–240 per room per night in the towns.

Possible guided moments

Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity.

- ✦ Bishkek: a city walk with a local guide on arrival day
- ✦ Ala-Archa: the hike to the Ak-Sai waterfall with a hiking guide
- ✦ Karakol: the Dungan mosque and the wooden cathedral with a town guide
- ✦ Altyn-Arashan: the trek with a mountain guide (not required: the trail along the river is well marked)
- ✦ Jyrgalan: the walk across the alpine meadows with a guide from the village

Ideas to adapt the route

- ➔ Shorter (12–14 days): skip the slow day in Karakol, drop Naryn and drive from Kochkor straight over the Kalmak-Ashuu pass to Song-Kul, or skip Altyn-Arashan
- ➔ Longer: a multi-day horse trek to Song-Kul, Kel-Suu lake (border permit), or the south with Arslanbob and Osh
- ➔ Less active: replace the Altyn-Arashan trek with a ride in the 6x6 truck or an extra day at Issyk-Kul
- ➔ Combine the two: private driver for the mountain passes, self-drive around Issyk-Kul

- Combine with Kazakhstan (Almaty, Charyn canyon) or Uzbekistan (mind the 30-in-60-days rule)

Included

- ✓ Pickup at Bishkek airport and drop-off at the airport with a private driver
- ✓ 13 nights with breakfast at the level you choose (Budget, Comfort or Premium): hotel in Bishkek, guesthouses, and 4 nights in yurt camps
- ✓ Your choice, from day 3 to day 14 (12 days): 4x4 with private driver (fuel and the driver's board and lodging included) or rental 4x4 with full insurance and second driver (self-drive; fuel is paid locally)
- ✓ Breakfast every day, and the meals at the yurt camps: dinner at Altyn-Arashan (day 6) and on the south shore (day 9), full board at Song-Kul (days 12–14)
- ✓ 6x6 truck to Altyn-Arashan for luggage
- ✓ Horses and horsemen at Song-Kul
- ✓ Private eagle hunter demonstration, felt workshop, and in Jyrgalan a ride with a horseman if you prefer riding to walking
- ✓ National park and site entrance fees
- ✓ Early check-in in Bishkek on day 2, local SIM card and satellite communicator for the mountains

Not included

- International flight (Brussels – Bishkek via Istanbul; allow approx. €480–850 pp, depending on the month); I'm happy to book it for you
- Travel and cancellation insurance (travel assistance insurance mandatory, covering horse riding and stays up to 3,500 m)
- Lunches and dinners outside the yurt camps, including the farewell dinner with komuz (my recommendation: I'm happy to book it for you), and drinks; indicative price approx. €15–25 pp per day
- Local guides: optional, on request for any activity (including a mountain guide to Altyn-Arashan)
- Self-drive: fuel, tolls and parking (indicative price ± €200 per vehicle for the whole route; paid locally)
- Self-drive: the rental car deposit (blocked on your card) and any traffic fines
- Tips for driver, horsemen and any guides (indicative approx. €4 pp per day)
- Border permit and trip to Chatyr-Kul lake

Practical information

VISA (BELGIAN CITIZENS)

Visa-free for Belgians: since 1 January 2026 up to 30 days within any 60-day period (previously 60 days). Passport valid for at least 6 months after arrival. Border zones (e.g. Chatyr-Kul) require a separate permit.

HEALTH

No mandatory vaccinations. Recommended: routine vaccines, hepatitis A; consider rabies (dogs, remote areas far from medical care). Altitude: your highest overnight stay is Song-Kul at 3,016 m, with passes above 3,400 m; the itinerary builds up gradually for acclimatisation. Medical care outside Bishkek is limited. Consult wanda.be (ITG).

CURRENCY & PAYMENT

Kyrgyz som (KGS); €1 ≈ KGS 95–100. ATMs in Bishkek and Karakol; bring cash (euro or dollar) for rural areas.

FLIGHT TIME FROM BRUSSELS

Approx. 9–11h with one connection (Istanbul); no direct flights.

TIME DIFFERENCE

Kyrgyzstan (UTC+6): +4h in Belgian summer, +5h in winter.

LANGUAGE

Kyrgyz and Russian; limited English outside Bishkek and tourist guesthouses.

MEALS

Breakfast is included every day, and so are the meals at the yurt camps (Altyn-Arashan, the south shore and Song-Kul). For the other meals I give you my addresses and favourite restaurants, but I don't include them in the price: that way you choose where and when you eat.

GUIDES

Prefer a guide? I can add a local guide to any activity. Only the horseman at Song-Kul (and in Jyrgalan if you prefer riding to walking) and the eagle hunter in Bokonbaevo are included.

As of September 2026 — check diplomatie.belgium.be (travel advice) and wanda.be (health) before you travel.

Travelling responsibly

Kyrgyzstan is a model of community-based tourism: you stay with host families and herding families and we work with local drivers, horsemen, host families and a women's felt cooperative, so money goes straight to the villages. Yurt camps follow a carry-out-all-waste rule. Self-drivers stay on existing tracks to protect the fragile high pastures.



Contact & booking

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Put together personally by Yari, down to the last detail. — Yari Steennot

No group travel and no fixed dates: you travel privately, at your own pace. Leave out what doesn't appeal to you, add what you like. I give you my restaurant tips, but you choose freely where you eat: nobody sends you to expensive restaurants for a commission.

MY CONTACT ON THE GROUND: [contact name]

Photo credits

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COVER Song-Kul lake — Photo: Thomas Holbach · CC BY 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Song-Kul_2015_02.jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 3 Snow-capped peaks in Ala-Archa National Park — Photo: Davide Mauro · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ala_Archa_panorama_02.jpg · *resized*

DAY 5 The colourful wooden Dungan mosque in Karakol — Photo: Kalpak Travel · CC BY 2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/) · [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dungan_Mosque_\(48220870702\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dungan_Mosque_(48220870702).jpg) · *resized*

DAY 6 The Arashan river winding through the Altyn-Arashan valley — Photo: Adam Harangozó · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arashan_River_in_Altyn_Arashan_Kyrgyzstan.jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 7 Horses beneath the red rocks of Jeti-Oguz — Photo: Bgag · CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/deed.en) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Horses_in_Jeti-Ögüz_Rocks.jpg · *cropped, resized*

ESTIMATED PRICES

Estimated prices: per person, based on 2 travellers sharing a room, excl. international flight, estimated from desk research (2027 price level). The binding price is the one in your personal proposal and booking confirmation. Ask for a no-obligation personal intake call or a proposal. Other dates, more or fewer days, something left out or added? Everything can be adapted.

This trip is a package under the Belgian Act of 21 November 2017 on the sale of package travel, linked travel arrangements and travel services. Before you sign, you receive the standard information form and our travel conditions. Steennot Travels is insured against insolvency with [insurer, address, policy number — to be completed]: in case of insolvency, payments are refunded and, where transport is included, repatriation is guaranteed. All prices are indicative estimates; the binding price is the one in your booking confirmation.

DAY 9 Red rock spires in Skazka (Fairy-tale) canyon — Photo: Incall · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) · [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fairy_Tale_Canyon_\(22-06-2026\)_\(21\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fairy_Tale_Canyon_(22-06-2026)_(21).jpg) · *cropped, resized*

DAY 9 Lake Issyk-Kul with the Tien Shan on the horizon — Photo: Ninara · CC BY 2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/) · [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Issyk-Kul_Kyrgyzstan_\(42812885110\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Issyk-Kul_Kyrgyzstan_(42812885110).jpg) · *cropped, resized*

DAY 12 The hairpin bends of the Moldo-Ashuu pass — Photo: AseinMad · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) · commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moldo-Ashuu_mountain_pass_view_Ak-Talaa_02.jpg · *cropped, resized*

DAY 12 Herders' yurts on the summer pastures of Song-Kul — Photo: Myrzabek Ozubekov · CC BY-SA 4.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) · [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SK_yurt_camp_\(1_of_1\)-8.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SK_yurt_camp_(1_of_1)-8.jpg) · *cropped, resized*

DAY 12 Yurt camp on the shore of Song-Kul lake — Photo: Ninara · CC BY 2.0 (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/) · [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Song-Kul_Kyrgyzstan_\(30709310728\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Song-Kul_Kyrgyzstan_(30709310728).jpg) · *cropped, resized*