

The next steppe: can Kyrgyzstan become an adventure tourism hotspot?

The Central Asian country – host of the World Nomad Games – is attracting growing numbers of hikers, riders and skiers



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By Tom Allan

Originally published by The Financial Times, 2nd November 2018

Through the dust I can see a throng of men on horseback. They press and jostle until one rider bursts clear, swinging a heavy object up to his saddle — the goat carcass which, in the Kyrgyz game of kok-boru, serves as a shaggy, leggy, 50kg ball.

It is early September and I'm at the World Nomad Games, Central Asia's answer to the Olympics, held in the lakeside town of Cholpon Ata in eastern Kyrgyzstan. It continues a tradition that began, legend has it, with Genghis Khan's gathering of the steppe tribes in 1206, though things look a little different today. At this, the third modern edition of the Games, events are held in an arena built by Gazprom, the giant Russian natural gas group, and competitors have come from more than 70 countries, including France and Brazil.

“Most foreigners can't even point to Kyrgyzstan on a map,” says Saidana Kichitayeva, a journalism student from Bishkek University, one of 600 volunteers here. “The Games are our chance to show our country to the world, to show our culture and our traditions.”

And for the Kyrgyz, there is no prouder tradition than the game of kok-boru, the rules of which are simple: a freshly slaughtered, headless goat is dumped in the centre of the pitch, and two teams of four riders battle to pick it up and heave it into a huge plastic tub that serves

as a goal. The American team I'm watching haven't quite mastered the technique of putting goat in goal, and keep leaping in feet first, still clutching the carcass (they end up losing to the Kazakhs, the only team thought likely to challenge the Kyrgyz favourites). What happens to the goat after the match, I ask my US-educated guide Farkhad Alimbaev. He mimes an eating action. "It's been, like, pretty well tenderised," he adds.



Performers on horseback at the World Nomad Games © Sergey Ponomarev/New York Times / Redux / Eyevine

Less bloodthirsty events are held in a yurt village in Khirchin valley, high above the main lakeside arenas. Yaks and Bactrian camels look on as men wrestle in the sunshine, stripped to the waist, their bodies thwacking on to soft mats with each throw. There is a bazaar selling everything from wolf skins to novelty T-shirts, and horseback archery too, one of the few events where women get to do something other than hold the trophies (the other exception is the game of kyz kuu, in which men chase women on horseback, attempting to steal a kiss, before the women turn the tables and pursue the men). The mounted archery is won by a Kyrgyz rider and surprise third goes to Texan Serena Lynn. "I honestly didn't expect that," she beams, "coming here and riding with these girls on their home turf — it doesn't get much better."

This will be her last chance to compete in Kyrgyzstan, though, as the Games will move to Turkey in 2020. Some locals are angry at the move to a country not noted for its nomadic culture, an official tells me, but most seem sanguine. Sapar Mankushev is a doctor from Cholpon Ata proudly sporting a World Nomad Games baseball cap. "We are nomads: moving is natural for us," he says sipping kumis (fermented mare's milk). "Remember that the Olympics started in ancient Greece and moved to other countries. Maybe our Games can move to Europe, to America, who knows . . ."

The Nomad Games provide an immersive introduction to the region's ancient heritage, but the second part of my trip offers a glimpse of what some hope will be a future for these remote Kyrgyz valleys. As families in Khirchin strip the felt coverings from their yurts, ready to move on, I head east into the Tien Shan, the "mountains of heaven", on a road that climbs gradually between rows of overgrown lime trees. Piles of mud bricks dry in the autumn sun and in every garden a hay rick is stacked as tall as the house, ready for winter. The asphalt turns to dirt and we bump alongside a river that rushes through a pine forests striped with bands of golden larch. Huge red cliffs tower over the valley, lined with afternoon shadows.

After all this beauty, my first sight of Jyrgalan comes as a shock. A small town that will be my base for exploring the mountains, Jyrgalan was once home to the region's largest coal mine and the latest delicacies from Moscow, but memories of those times have crumbled like the blocky brick houses where the miners once lived. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the mine stuttered to a slow death, finally closing last year. The town's population has slumped to about a thousand — a fifth of its peak — many of whom stayed only because they were unable to sell their houses. Sales of alcohol were banned.



But one family chose to move here at Jyrgalan's lowest ebb. "Everyone said we were mad to come," laughs Gulmira Primova, who arrived here in 2014 and, together with her husband Emil Ibakov and a co-operative of 10 other families, is aiming to turn Jyrgalan into a mountain tourism hub. Emil had childhood memories of sledging on the hills around the village and a hunch that alpine tourism could take off in Kyrgyzstan: 90 per cent of the country is above 1,500 metres and it offers visa-free travel for most western countries. With funding from USAID the couple built a guesthouse that sleeps 30, with an additional yurt camp a few miles up the valley. They offer back-country skiing and snowshoeing in winter, horse trekking and hiking in summer. It opened in 2015 and for much of this year, they've been fully booked.

I eat dinner alongside young couples from France and Belgium, some hardened Aussie backpackers and a group of lawyers from the UK. Tomorrow's expeditions are nervously

discussed and compared: some are setting off on horseback, others, like me, on foot. For all of us, it will be our first taste of the Tien Shan. I also have a more immediate concern — a rumbling stomach bug — but my guide Farkhad has a fail-safe cure. “What you need is vodka,” he advises. Against my better judgment, I submit to his prescription.



Hikers in the Tien Shan © Alex Ishchenko

The next morning crisp autumn sunshine floods the peaks. Against the odds the vodka has worked and, gut health apparently restored, we set off on a three-day trek through open pastures, scattered with herds of grazing horses and shepherds’ yurts. With Almas Davletov, a mountain guide from Jyrgalan, porter Muhtabeg Begturov and a packhorse to myself, I feel like Mallory setting off for Everest.

We pause at a camp in the shadow of the first pass and three young shepherds welcome us in to their yurt. Patched with tattered plastic sheeting, it is a far cry from the pristine structures at the Nomad Games. Inside, a low table is strewn with half-eaten bowls of mutton stew and sheep bones sucked clean, and the air is thick with the universal shepherd-reek of lanolin and wood smoke. They have seen tourists nearly every day this summer, Samat Kizgapolu tells me as he pours tea, adding that they hope to set up a “proper yurt camp” for tourists next summer.



Spectators at the World Nomad Games, September 7, 2018 © Getty

We part with the traditional Kyrgyz blessing — hands drawn slowly downwards over the face — and begin the long climb to our campsite. We pitch our tents beside a glass-clear stream that snakes through a valley burnt with the reds and golds of autumn. On the tiny stove guide Almas somehow turns out a delicious rice plov which, rich with lamb fat, is the perfect foil to the evening chill.

Almas, 31, grew up in Jyrgalan and feels no nostalgia for the days of the coal mine. “It was hard work, dirty, dangerous,” he says, sipping black tea. As one of very few English-speaking guides in town he is in demand: Russian is almost universally spoken as a second language in Kyrgyzstan and few outside the capital Bishkek speak English.

As the peaks of the heavenly mountains turn amber, the conversation moves to families. The Kyrgyz pride themselves on being able to recall the names of seven generations on their father’s side (I manage a shameful two), and in the impermanent world of the nomad, such continuity was vital. Perhaps this is why the national Epic of Manas has assumed a totemic quality for Kyrgyzstan: a statue of Manas, a warrior-king, has replaced that of Lenin in Ala-Too Square in Bishkek and his legend has even inspired a recent Kyrgyz pop tune. The poem’s history may be contentious, with roots either deep in Kyrgyz oral history, or in the mind of a late 18th century inventor, depending on whom you believe, but there’s no doubt that such tales have been spun around the yurt camps for millennia.

I wake to find my water bottle frozen solid and the pools outside skimmed with ice. The silent mountain ridges are dusted with fresh snow as we strike camp and begin our ascent of the 3,467-metre Terim Tor pass. From the wind-scoured saddle we can see across the grazing flocks and yurt camps of the Turgen-Ak Suu valley and beyond, to our next camp site

beneath the jagged ridges of Mount Boz Uchuk. From there it's a long downhill ramble through pastures and pine forests to the town of Boz- Uchuk, the endpoint of our trek.



Tom Allan's view of Terim Tor valley © Tom Allan



A view of the Games venue © Getty

After three gloriously phone-signal-free days we return to the news that Kyrgyzstan easily

won the kok-boru final. Better still, a Russian-style banya has been prepared for us, with sauna, ice-cold water and birch brooms (veniki) for optional back-whipping. After the decades of decline, creature comforts are slowly returning to Jyrgalan.

For guest house owner Gulmira Primova, this is just the beginning. “We have so many ideas for the future,” she says, “the only problem is finding the money to make them happen.” I ask her how she would like to see the town five years from now. She reaches for her phone and, wrinkling her nose into a smile, offers up a photo she has saved — a neatly tended Swiss mountain village, bustling with tourists.