

Santa Fe Workshops

INTO TO THE HEART OF KYRGYZSTAN

September 1st - 13th, 2027

*Bishkek - Kochkor - Tamga - Karakol -
Chon Kemin Valley – Bishkek*



**Please note: While we do our best to follow the above itinerary, changes may be made to any aspect of the tour due to a variety of potential situations or unforeseen circumstances.*

Day 1: Bishkek / Arrival Day

Upon arrival at Bishkek International Airport, you'll be met by your private driver and transferred to your hotel in the city center. You'll meet your photography instructor, Arthur, and your tour leader, who will both accompany you throughout the journey. Bishkek is a city of contrasts, where Soviet era buildings, broad leafy avenues, and tranquil parks sit beneath the snow capped peaks of the Ala Too Range. The rest of the day will be yours to rest, settle in, and recover from jet lag. For those arriving early, there will be an optional golden hour walk through Ala Too Square, the city's main square, followed by a stroll through Oak Park, one of Bishkek's oldest green spaces, known for its shady paths, sculptures, and easy atmosphere. Later, we'll come together for our orientation meeting before heading out for a delicious welcome dinner.

Accommodation: 5 hotel*

Included meals: Dinner

Day 2: Bishkek

After breakfast we'll set out on a photography walk through Bishkek, exploring a capital where monumental facades, long straight avenues, public squares, and distant mountains create a strong first impression. Our focus throughout the day will be street photography, capturing the city through its daily movement, local faces, and market scenes. We'll spend time at the bustling Osh Bazaar and in several different neighborhoods, giving us the chance to meet and interact with people while photographing the rhythm of life in Bishkek as it happens around us. Later we'll visit a modern Kyrgyz felt workshop, where unique materials are used to create everything from ethnographic horse trappings to simple contemporary shoes, an approach that grew out of the need to create new livelihoods after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Our dinner tonight will be another group dining experience at an excellent Bishkek restaurant.

Accommodation: 5 hotel*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 3: Bishkek / Chuy Valley / Kochkor

Today we'll leave Bishkek behind and travel through the Chuy Valley toward Kochkor, a drive of around 5 hours, with several stops along the way. Our main visit will be Burana Tower, an 11th-century minaret and one of the most important historic sites in northern Kyrgyzstan, rising unexpectedly from the open landscape. Around it, ancient balbals, carved stone markers left behind by Turkic peoples, are scattered across the grounds and add even more atmosphere to the site. We'll also stop for lunch en route, as we continue deeper into the countryside. Once we arrive in Kochkor, we'll check into our guesthouse and have some time to rest or head out with our cameras before dinner.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 4: Kochkor

We'll spend the day getting a closer look at life in this rural part of Kyrgyzstan. As we visit local families and workshops, we'll witness the country's most important handicrafts, while also having the chance to capture the everyday scenes unfolding around us. Throughout the day we'll gain a better understanding of the skills, routines, and home based practices that continue to shape life here. There will also be time to walk through Kochkor itself, where low houses, dusty lanes, grazing animals, and mountain views all come together to create a setting that feels both simple and deeply rooted. With its slower pace and strong sense of place, this will be a very rewarding day for both cultural encounters and photography.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 5: Kochkor / Kyzyl Tuu / Tamga

Today we'll make our way toward Tamga, a drive of approximately 5 hours, with several excellent stops along the way. Our first stop will be Kyzyl Tuu, a village known for its long tradition of yurt making. We'll have lunch at the home of a yurt maker before learning about the process step by step, from shaping the timber pieces to assembling the circular wooden framework that gives the yurt its structure. It will be a wonderful opportunity for cultural and documentary photography, with tools, textures, and hands at work all around us. We'll then continue along the southern shore of Issyk Kul Lake, where the views open out to the water and distant mountain peaks. Later we'll visit Skazka Canyon, known as "Fairy Tale Canyon", where red rock formations shaped by wind and erosion create a landscape of curves and unusual natural forms. We'll arrive in Tamga in the evening, a tranquil village on the lake's southern shore, where we'll settle into our guesthouse, enjoy dinner, and get some well deserved rest.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 6: Tamga / Barskoon Gorge / Tamga

Today will begin with a walk through the peaceful village of Tamga, where quiet lanes, simple homes, and the lakeside setting offer a look at daily life along the southern shore of Issyk Kul. We'll also visit a Soviet Sanatorium, an old health resort with a unique past, once used as a recovery center for astronauts returning from space. From there we'll head to Barskoon Gorge, one of the most scenic valleys in the region, where dense forest, rocky slopes, waterfalls, and towering mountains create a dramatic change of scenery. We'll spend time exploring the gorge, stopping at viewpoints and enjoying the many photographic opportunities along the way. After returning to Tamga, you may choose to relax at the guesthouse, visit the sauna for a one hour session, or head out for a golden hour stroll along the lakeshore as the evening light settles over Issyk Kul. We'll end the day with another freshly prepared home cooked dinner.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 7: Tamga / Djeti Oguz / Yrgyk / Karakol

After breakfast today we'll leave Tamga behind and make our drive to Karakol. Our first stop will be Djeti Oguz, where striking red rock formations rise out of the valley in bold shapes and create one of the most recognizable landscapes in the region. We'll have time to capture the scenery before continuing to the village of Yrdyk, home to the Dungan community, Chinese Muslims of Hui origin who have preserved a distinct culture, cuisine, and way of life here in eastern Kyrgyzstan. There we'll be welcomed by hosts for a traditional lunch in their home, followed by a guided walk through the village to learn more about the community and spend time in a place that few travelers ever reach. In the mid afternoon, we'll continue on to Karakol and check into our accommodation.

Accommodation: 3.5 hotel*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 8: Karakol

Today we'll head out for a full walking tour of Karakol, a town with a very different feel from the places we've visited so far. Known for its wooden architecture, tree lined streets, and layered history, Karakol is a place where Russian Orthodox, Central Asian, and Dungan influences all come together. We'll visit its remarkable wooden Orthodox church, wander through its many different neighborhoods, and spend time in regional markets where daily life is on full display. Along the way we'll also stop to taste regional dishes and enjoy the chance to meet people in a town that still feels very genuine and welcoming.

Accommodation: 3.5 hotel*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 9: Karakol / Chon-Kyzylsuu Valley / Karakol

We'll set out this morning in a Russian military truck, heading into the remote Chon Kyzylsuu Valley through a landscape of rough tracks, open pasture, and rising mountain walls. The drive itself is part of the experience, giving us a closer look at one of the wilder corners of this region before we continue on foot. Once there, we'll head out for a beautiful light hike through the valley, surrounded by alpine scenery, open space, and the kind of silence that makes places such as this feel far removed from everyday life. For those who wish, there will also be the chance to take a dip in an outdoor hot spring, a memorable way to relax in the middle of nature. We'll enjoy a picnic lunch in these surroundings before returning to Karakol for the evening.

Accommodation: 3.5 hotel*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch

Day 10: Karakol / Cholpon Ata / Chon Kemin Valley

After breakfast today, we'll leave Karakol behind and drive along the northern shore of Issyk Kul Lake toward Chong Kemin, with the total driving time coming to around 5 hours. Along the way we'll stop in Cholpon Ata to visit its open air petroglyph site, where ancient rock carvings lie scattered across the landscape and offer a fascinating glimpse into the region's distant past. We'll also enjoy a boat ride on Issyk Kul, with wide views across the water and the mountains beyond. From there we'll continue on to Chong Kemin Valley, a greener and quieter part of the country known for its forests, rivers, and rural life. Upon arrival, we'll check into our guesthouse and have some time to rest before heading out for a walk through the valley. In the evening, we'll return for another homemade dinner.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 11: Chon Kemin Valley

Today is one of the most exciting experiences of the trip, observing a Kok Boru game. This is Central Asia's best known horseback game and an important part of Kyrgyz culture. Played by highly skilled horsemen, it's a fast and demanding sport that calls for strength, control, and remarkable horsemanship. We'll spend time watching it unfold as riders race across the field and the action shifts quickly from one side to the other, giving us one of the most unusual and memorable photography opportunities of the journey. We'll then explore Chon Kemin Valley and nearby villages, getting a closer look at life in this mountain region. As we visit farms and meet residents, we'll learn about the routines that continue to shape daily life here, with pastures, rivers, and wooded slopes all around us. There will also be the option to take a short hike in the valley, as well as optional horse ride experience. We'll also take part in a boorsok cooking class, learning how to make the fried bread that is such a familiar part of Kyrgyz hospitality. In the evening, we'll gather for dinner and another overnight stay in our family run guesthouse.

Accommodation: 3.5 guesthouse*

Included meals: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

Day 12: Chon Kemin Valley / Bishkek

After a leisurely breakfast, we'll leave the valley behind and drive 3 hours back to Bishkek. We'll check into our hotel and have time to rest or enjoy a final look around the city. In the evening we'll have our farewell dinner at a beautiful restaurant, marking the end of our memorable trip.

Hotel: 5 hotel*

Included meals: Breakfast, Dinner

Day 13: Bishkek / Departure Day

You will be picked up by a private driver who will take you to the airport for your departing flight.

Included meals: Breakfast