ECO VALLEY TOURS

Kyrgyzstan

Guest Preparation Guide

All-Season Edition

Song-Kul • Kel Suu • Skazka Canyon • Karakol • Altyn Arashan

How to Use This Guide

This document is your complete pre-departure reference for travelling with Eco Valley Tours. It covers what to pack by season, destination-specific needs, fitness preparation, health considerations, and what to expect at each location.

Read it fully before your trip and bring it along as a field reference.

1. About Kyrgyzstan & Our Destinations

Kyrgyzstan sits in the heart of Central Asia, a landlocked country of dramatic mountain ranges, alpine lakes, and vast grasslands. Over 90% of the country lies above 1,500 m (4,900 ft), with much of the interior exceeding 3,000 m. Summers are unfortunately short, while our winters are long and severe (especially in mountainous regions). Weather changes rapidly and without warning - this is true year-round.

Destination Overview

Destination	Elevation	Key Character
Song-Kul Lake	3,016 m / 9,895 ft	High alpine lake; cold nights year-round; nomadic yurt camps typically open May 1st – mid October (with exceptions); snow is possible in any month, but becomes much more common in September. Limited service.
Kel Suu Lake	2,800 m / 9,186 ft	Remote Naryn gorge; accessible Early May - September; river crossings; unpredictable weather; limited services. Lake is not always present, ask us for the status!
Skazka Canyon	~1,800 m / 5,906 ft	Fairy-tale eroded clay formations; hot in summer; short trails; accessible most of the year. Some service.
Karakol	1,770 m / 5,807 ft	Regional hub; base for Tian Shan treks; ski resort in winter; services available
Altyn Arashan	2,530 m / 8,300 ft	Hot springs valley above Karakol; great for hiking or day rides. Accessible May – Oct. More wildlife present when compared to other regions.

2. Seasonal Overview

Kyrgyzstan has four distinct seasons with very different travel realities. Your packing list should start here.

Season / Months	Temps (Day / Night)	Conditions	What to Expect
Winter **Dec - Feb**	-5 to -20°C (day) -15 to -35°C (night)	Heavy snow at altitude, frozen lakes, limited road access	Karakol ski season; high passes closed; Song-Kul is largely inaccessible; Kel Suu is fully closed
Spring **Mar - May**	5 to 15°C (day) -5 to 5°C (night)	Snowmelt, muddy trails, rivers in high flood, unpredictable frost	Tourism season slowly begins, Altyn Arashan and Song Kul open around this time; mountain routes muddy
Summer **Jun - Aug**	20 to 30°C (day) 5 to 12°C (night)	Peak season; some afternoon thunderstorms possible; hot in canyons, cold at altitude	All destinations open; Song-Kul yurt camps active; Skazka Canyon can reach 35°C
Autumn **Sep - Nov**	0 to 5°C (day) -5 to 2°C (night)	Rapidly cooling; early snow at altitude from Oct; fewer crowds	Best light for photography; Kel Suu closes Oct 1st; Song-Kul camps begin decreasing in size October 1st, but some tours still possible after this

3. Master Packing List

Below is a complete packing list organized by category. The Season column uses: W = Winter, Sp = Spring, Su = Summer, A = Autumn. Items marked ALL are required regardless of season.

3.1 Clothing & Layering System

Kyrgyzstan demands a three-layer approach: base layer for moisture, mid layer for warmth, outer layer for wind and rain. Do not rely on a single heavy jacket.

Item	Season	Notes
1x Merino wool or synthetic base layer (top & bottom)	**ALL**	Avoid cotton, this stays wet and chills fast
2-3x Fleece mid-layer or down sweater	**ALL**	Lightweight packable down is ideal. Recommended 3 layers after mid-September.
1x Waterproof/windproof hard shell jacket	**ALL**	Gore-Tex or equivalent; essential at altitude. Winds are prevalent, especially on horseback
Waterproof/windproof trousers	**ALL**	Or zip-off convertible trousers for summer
Hiking trousers (quick-dry)	**ALL**	1 pair typically okay; synthetic, not denim
Moisture-wicking t-shirts	**ALL**	1 for every 2-3 days. Merino preferred for odour
Warm hat (wool or fleece)	**ALL**	You will need this even in July in mountain ranges like Song-Kul
Balaclava or neck gaiter	**W, Sp, A**	Critical for Song-Kul and Kel Suu mornings and nights.
Heavy insulated jacket (puffer)	**W, Sp, A**	Highly recommended Oct-May unless sufficient layers from above.
Thermal underwear (heavy weight)	**W, Sp, A**	Merino or expedition-weight synthetic
Gloves (liner + waterproof outer)	**ALL**	Layered gloves outperform a single heavy pair. Important against wind when on horseback. Extremely important for W, Sp, A.
Sun hat with brim	**Su, A**	Strong UV at altitude; no shade at Song-Kul
Lightweight long-sleeve shirt	**Su**	Sun protection and insect barrier
Swimwear	**Su**	For Altyn Arashan hot springs
Wool or thermal socks	**ALL**	Merino wool; blister prevention is critical. Plan for # of days.

3.2 Footwear

Item	Season	Notes
Waterproof hiking boots (ankle-high)	**ALL**	HIGHLY recommended to be broken in before arrival.
Lightweight camp shoes / sandals	**Su, A**	For evenings at yurt camps and hot springs
Insulated waterproof winter boots	**W, Sp**	Bring if hiking boots insufficient. Rated to at least -20°C for winter travel

3.3 Sleep & Shelter

Note: All Yurts provide bedding and plentiful bedding, pillows and blankets. No need to bring your own sleeping bag unless desired, but it does become a light recommendation after mid-September. While the yurts will be warm with plenty of blankets, you may wish to bring a sleeping bag.

Item	Season	Notes
Earplugs	**ALL**	Yurt camp neighbourhoods can be lively at night
Eye mask	**Su**	Kyrgyzstan has long summer days - light fades late
Sleeping Bag (OPTIONAL)	**ALL**	Yurts are warm with plenty of blankets, but some guests may consider bringing an extra sleeping bag starting late September (in the fall / winter season)

3.4 Health, First Aid & Safety

Item	Season	Notes
Personal first aid kit	**ALL**	Basics. Blister care, bandages, antiseptic wipes, medical tape
Prescription medications (extra supply)	**ALL**	Pharmacies in rural Kyrgyzstan are extremely limited
Ibuprofen + paracetamol	**ALL**	For altitude headaches and muscle pain
Diamox (acetazolamide)	**ALL**	Consult your doctor; recommended if you are prone to altitude sickness.
Oral rehydration salts, electrolyte powder	**ALL**	Altitude and exertion can cause faster-than-normal dehydration
Antidiarrheal medication	**ALL**	Dietary changes are common.
Water purification tablets or Steripen	**ALL**	Boil or purify all stream/lake water
Sunscreen SPF 50+	**ALL**	UV intensity at 3,000 m is roughly 30% higher than at sea level
Lip balm with SPF	**ALL**	Lips crack quickly at altitude
Quality sunglasses (UV400)	**ALL**	Category 3-4; snow reflection can be blinding
Insect repellent (DEET 30%+)	**Su, Sp, A**	Mosquitoes at river valleys; ticks in tall grass
Emergency whistle	**ALL**	Attach to pack
Headlamp + spare batteries	**ALL**	No lighting at yurt camps or on trail

3.5 Gear, Tech & Miscellaneous

Item	Season	Notes
Daypack (25-35L)	**ALL**	For day hikes from base camp; waterproof cover included
Dry bags or waterproof pack liner	**ALL**	A good to have.
Power bank (20,000 mAh+)	**ALL**	No outlets at yurt camps; charge before heading out
Universal adapter (Type C/F)	**ALL**	Kyrgyzstan uses 220V/50Hz, European-style plugs.
Camera (weatherproof)	**ALL**	Dramatic landscapes year-round; warning: dust is a hazard
Offline maps downloaded (Maps.me or Gaia GPS)	**ALL**	No data signal at most of these destinations
Cash in Kyrgyzstani Som (KGS)	**ALL**	Card payment not available outside Bishkek/Osh; ATMs scarce
Passport + visa documentation	**ALL**	Keep a colour photocopy separate from the originals, ESPECIALLY for Kel Suu due to proximity to Chinese border.
Travel insurance documents (printed)	**ALL**	Must include emergency helicopter evacuation
Duct tape (small roll)	**ALL**	Optional, tried and true. Boot repair, pack repair, blister barrier.
Reusable water bottle (1L insulated). Enough water for the trip.	**ALL**	Stays cool in heat, doesn't freeze in cold
High-energy snacks (bars, nuts, dried fruit)	**ALL**	Yurt camp meals are hearty but mealtimes are fixed
Toilet paper + trowel	**ALL**	Facilities are rare outside Karakol; practice Leave No Trace

4. Destination-Specific Guidance

4.1 Song-Kul Lake

Key Facts

Elevation: 3,016 m | Best season: Late May – Mid September

Song-Kul is an open, treeless plateau lake with no wind protection and no shelter outside the yurts. Weather changes in minutes. You can experience sunshine, hail, and a rainbow within a single hour.

Essential Preparation

- Pack as if it will snow - it can, even in July.
- Wind is constant and fierce on the open plateau. A windproof shell is really non-negotiable.
- The roads to the starting point can be rough at times. If you are prone to motion sickness, consider packing medication.
- Some yurts may or may not have electricity. Nowadays, solar panels are becoming more common, but they are not guaranteed. When required, yurts are heated by a central stove. Bring a headlamp, spare batteries, or a portable charger.
- Water from the lake must be purified. The yurt camp provides food and tea. Bring enough bottled water for the duration.
- Horse riding our main activity in Song Kul

⚠ Do Not Underestimate

Altitude can hit people differently. Headaches, nausea, and fatigue are possible on arrival.

Pace yourself. Drink 3-4 litres of water per day. Avoid alcohol on the first night.

Nighttime temperatures below 0°C are routine, even at the height of summer.

4.2 Kel Suu Lake

Key Facts

Elevation: 2,800 m | Best season: June - September | Nearest services: Naryn (150 km) | Permit required: yes

Kel Suu is the most remote destination on this list. It sits near the Chinese border and requires a border zone permit arranged in advance. Access conditions change each month, and can involve river crossings by car or by foot (if safe).

Essential Preparation

- Depending on the season, some light river crossing might be required and shoes or sandals that can get soaked are essential - do not attempt crossings in hiking boots if they are not quick to dry.
- The route is typically not marked. You will travel with a local guide - follow their lead.
- Weather in the Naryn gorge is entirely unpredictable. A two-day window can close to one.
- Cell service: zero. Satellite communicator strongly recommended.

⚠ **PERMITS**

Eco Valley Tours will handle the border zone permit but **scanned passport copies MUST BE SENT to us at least 2 WEEKS in advance.**

Ensure you have your passport on your person. No Permit = No Entry.

4.3 Skazka Canyon

Key Facts

Elevation: ~1,800 m | Best season: Year-round (limited in winter) | Nearest services: Karakol (70 km)

Skazka ('Fairy Tale') Canyon is one of the most accessible destination on this list, with a short walking trail through eroded clay formations along the southern shore of Issyk-Kul. The main trail is 2–3 km. Most visitors spend 1-2 hours here.

Essential Preparation

- Summer temperatures can hit 35°C+. Sun hat, water, and sunscreen are mandatory.
- The clay is unstable - stay on marked paths. Do not climb the formations.
- The canyon is most dramatic at sunrise and sunset; light is harsh at midday.
- In spring and after rain, the clay becomes extremely slippery.
- No facilities on site. Bring everything you need from Karakol.

4.4 Karakol

Key Facts

Elevation: 1,770 m | Open year-round | Regional hub - ATMs, pharmacy, restaurants, guesthouses available

Karakol is the main staging city for eastern Kyrgyzstan. It has reliable guesthouses, a central market (Osh Bazaar), pharmacies, ATMs, and the best restaurants outside Bishkek. Use your time here to stock up, charge all devices, and withdraw cash before heading into the mountains. In the summer, Karakol serves as the launch point for the region's best trekking routes. Popular trails lead to Ala-Kul Lake, the hot springs of Altyn Arashan, and the red sandstone formations of Jeti-Ögüz Valley.

Summer Season

- Weather is generally mild but variable - expect warm days, cold nights, and sudden rainstorms; proper layering and waterproof gear is still essential.
- Trail infrastructure is limited. Maps (offline), GPS, or staying with our guides are strongly recommended for longer routes.

Winter Season (Karakol Ski Area)

- The Karakol ski resort operates December through March with a chairlift and varied runs.
- Ski and snowboard rentals are available at the base, but quality is inconsistent - bring your own helmet if you can and wish to ski / snowboard.
- Off-piste and backcountry skiing is exceptional but requires avalanche gear (beacon, probe, shovel).

4.5 Altyn Arashan

Key Facts

Elevation: 2,530 m | Best season: May - October | 12 km from Karakol trailhead | Hot springs on site

Altyn Arashan (Golden Spring) is a hot springs valley reached by a steep 3-4 hour hike or short ride from Karakol. The valley is stunning, the springs are natural and very hot, and the guesthouses are rustic but welcoming. Bears are present in the valley - store food properly.

Essential Preparation

- Trails can be intense and require solid hiking fitness.
- Bring swimwear - the springs are the highlight. Water temperature is 38–42°C.
- Bears: do not leave food outside. Hang food bags or use sealed containers at guesthouses.
- The trail crosses several streams; gaiters are useful in spring.
- Cell service: none in the valley. GPS and offline maps recommended.

5. Altitude & Physical Preparation

5.1 Understanding Altitude

Altitude sickness (Acute Mountain Sickness / AMS) can affect anyone, regardless of fitness level. It is caused by reduced oxygen at elevation, not a lack of aerobic capacity. Our destinations range from 1,770 m to 3,016 m, with Song-Kul being the highest risk site. While an extremely rare occurrence, please notify your guide if any of the following symptoms appear:

Symptom	Action
Headache, fatigue, mild nausea	Rest, hydrate, take ibuprofen. Do not ascend further.
Vomiting, severe headache, loss of coordination	Descend immediately. This is a medical emergency.
Confusion, bluish lips, wet cough	Descend immediately and call for evacuation. This is life-threatening.

5.2 Recommended Fitness Preparation

Most tours on horseback require no fitness. If you anticipate you will be doing hiking, being training some training before departure to ensure the best experience. You do not need to be an elite athlete, but you should be comfortable with sustained moderate exertion at altitude.

- Consider hiking with a loaded pack (10-15 kg) on varied terrain for practice
- Cardiovascular base: 30-45 minutes of steady-state cardio, 4x per week
- Stair climbing or step-ups for descent strength (knees bear the load on the way down)
- Practice hiking in your actual boots well before departure - new footwear on the trail is a recipe for disaster.

6. Cultural Notes & Local Etiquette

Kyrgyz culture is warm and extraordinarily hospitable. Guests are treated with great respect, and small gestures of consideration go a long way.

In Yurts & Guesthouses

- Remove footwear before entering any yurt or home.
- Accept tea and food when offered - refusing is considered impolite.
- Do not step over or sit on the threshold of a yurt.
- The guest place of honour is furthest from the door and opposite the entrance.
- Ask permission before photographing people, especially women and elders.

General

- Dress modestly outside of trek situations, especially in towns and villages.
- Bargaining is normal in markets; it is not normal in restaurants or for tour prices.
- Tipping is appreciated; 10% in restaurants is generous.
- Kyrgyz people speak Kyrgyz and Russian. A few Russian phrases are warmly received.
- Do not pick wildflowers or disturb wildlife - this is part of our environmental commitment.

♥ Eco Valley Tours Environmental Commitment

Pack out everything you pack in. No exceptions.

Use the toilet facilities provided by yurt camps rather than open areas near water sources.

Do not feed horses or livestock without guide approval.

Stay on marked trails to prevent erosion of fragile alpine soils.

7. Insurance & Emergency Information

> ⚠ **Travel Insurance Is Mandatory**
> All guests must have active travel insurance that includes emergency helicopter evacuation and medical repatriation. Standard health insurance does not cover international evacuation.

Emergency Contacts

Service	Number / Detail
Kyrgyzstan Emergency (Police)	102
Ambulance / Medical	103
Bishkek International SOS Clinic	+996 312 90 09 11
Eco Valley Tours Guide (Local)	Provided at trip briefing

ecovalleytours.com
Questions? Contact us before your departure date.