

The mountain nomads of Kyrgyzstan can become much more than just part of a traveller's view. North & Central Asia Regional Manager Huw Owen samples their lifestyle at first hand, uncovering a programme that lets visitors contribute directly to local families by staying in their homes.

“These mountains stretch for thousands of leagues: among them are several hundred tall peaks which reach to the very sky; the valleys are dark and full of precipices. The snow that has accumulated here since the creation of the world has changed into ice rocks that do not melt either in spring or summer. There is a strong cold wind and travellers are molested by dragons.”

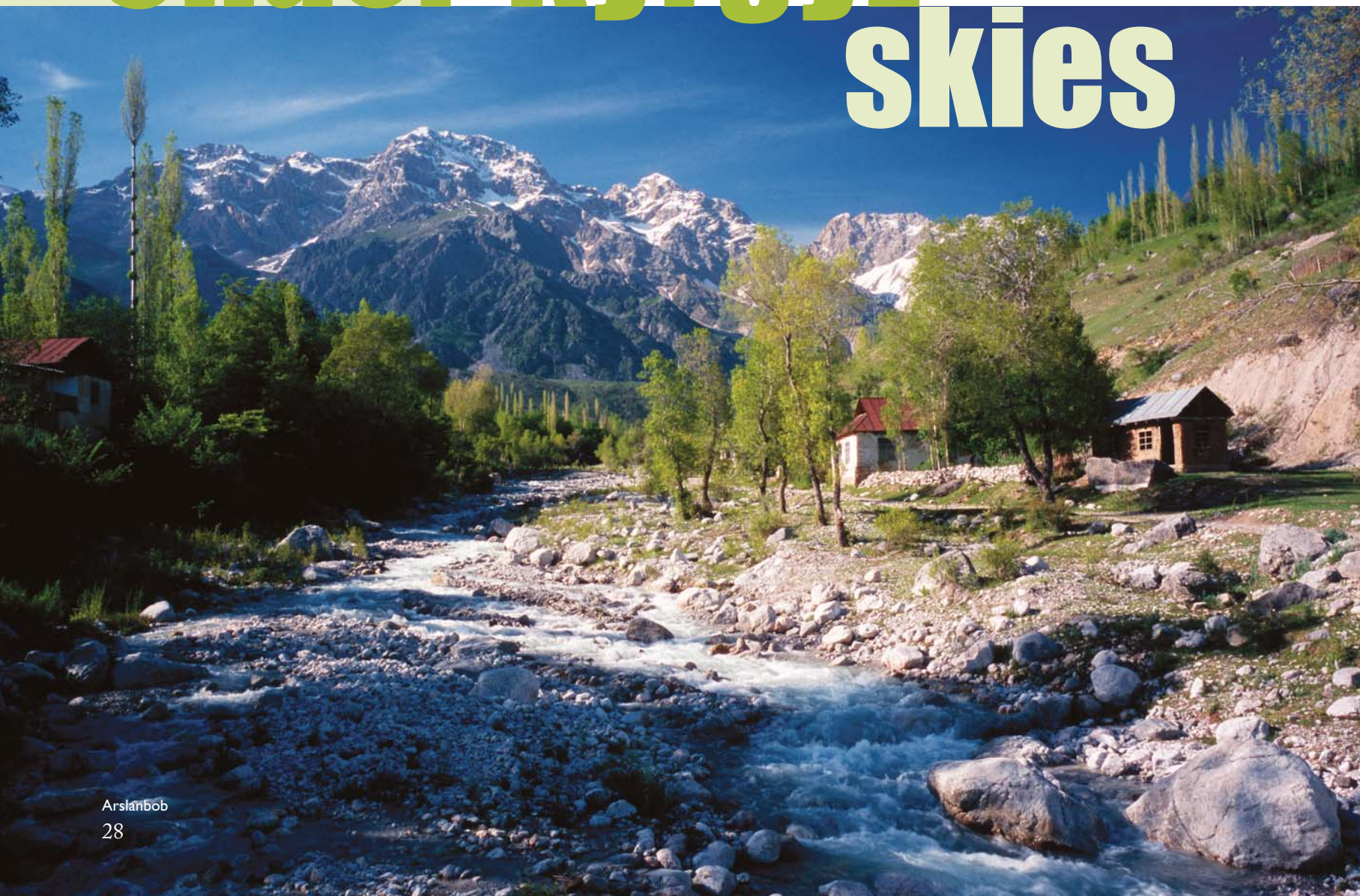
These words were written in the 7th century by the great Chinese Buddhist monk Xuan Zang, whose travels in the area took 17 years. Latter-day visitors to this mountain-bound nation will recognise the elemental beauty of the Tien Shan - “Mountains of Heaven” - in his description, though these days the warm welcome comes from local nomads rather than dragons. Staying with these nomads is a travel experience that contributes to – and learns from – the local cultures and leaves only light footprints behind.

You can see the Tien Shan from Kyrgyzstan's laid-back capital, Bishkek. Snow-capped and silent, they symbolise the essence of the country – isolation, tradition and staggering beauty. The peaks that

tower closest to the city – Pik Korona (4,860 metres) and Pik Semenov Tianshanskii (4,895 metres) act as constant reminders to the people of the lowlands that their nation's sense of itself lies in amongst those peaks, on the high altitude grasslands and yurt encampments of the jaiolos (high pastures).

A day's drive to the southeast lies Song Kol, a wild, shimmering alpine lake surrounded by classic jaiolos scenery – sweeping grasslands backed by stark, craggy peaks, punctuated only by occasional yurt camps and herders. Here one can sense the trepidation of Xuan Zang, confronted by a wild and mysterious land, an alpine wilderness high above Central Asia's deserts. He, like today's Kyrgyz farmers, would have stayed in yurts: basic but comfortable with plenty of bedding for when the temperature drops. When hosting today's travellers local families put on a good spread in the evening, a mixture of local food such as dumplings or grilled mutton, and also the region's two great consolations for a hard, demanding life: vodka and for the brave, fermented mare's milk, kumyss. Leave the dazzling skies to the chill of night: morning is the best time to venture out of your yurt to explore the local scenery.

Under Kyrgyz skies



Nomadic people in Kyrgyzstan can no longer rely on herding alone to sustain their families. Tourism is crucial in bringing much-needed money to rural communities, and staying in yurts is one of the best ways to do this. Yurts are also amongst the most environmentally-friendly types of accommodation anywhere in the world: your stay is a net gain to Kyrgyzstan's people and environment.

To the southwest of Song Kol the village of Arslanbob is a rural idyll of homesteads set amidst the spikes and spurs of 4,465-metre Babash-ata and surrounded by the world's largest walnut forests. In his book 'Wildwood' the British nature writer Roger Deakin observed the locals using walnuts as legal tender to pay for groceries, wine and even household goods and noted the irony of Kyrgyzstan's poverty "when it is so rich in all the things the world longs for: clean air, clean mountain water and wild, organic fruit."

Xuan Zang didn't pass this way, but one rather suspects he'd have stayed a while had he done so.

Huw Owen

North & Central Asia Regional Manager



Yurt near Song Kol

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For a slideshow of more images of Kyrgyzstan



Locals, Arslanbob



Inside a yurt



Altyn Arashan Valley

FACT FILE

Responsible tourism in Arslanbob and Song Kol is co-ordinated by the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) project, whose efforts have made this a centre for responsible tourism in Central Asia. Accommodation is in comfortable homestays and guesthouses and local excursions are organised through CBT, taking in mountain walks, waterfalls and the vast expanse of the jailoos. A 14-day itinerary taking in Song Kol and Arslanbob starts from £2,000 per person.

