



Post of the Month

Bishkek

U.S. Mission Nurtures Growing Partnership ///

By Lauren Perlaza and Rick Marshall

Not all poppy plants are opium producing; some are simply beautiful. The red poppies that bloom in May are emblematic of Kyrgyzstan and are a beautiful harbinger of the coming summer months.



Deputy Chief of Mission Larry Memmott and his family enjoy a horseback ride near Lake Song Kul.



Above: This carved memorial to an ancient Kyrgyz warrior is called a balbal. **Right:** From left, Lauren Perlaza, Linda Davis and Jennifer Holmes look at the unique felt and silk scarves at an artisan's shop in Bishkek.

The Kyrgyz have a saying—Көч жүрө жүрө түзөлөт—which means “as the caravan goes along, it straightens out.” Their journey has been long and often difficult, but whether the country’s caravan will ultimately straighten out and achieve its full potential remains to be seen.

Kyrgyzstan is in some ways an enchanting natural fairyland. The Tien Shan mountain range (“celestial mountains” in Chinese) covers most of Kyrgyzstan, creating a fantastic landscape of peaks, colorful valleys and awe-inspiring lakes. The largest and most famous is Lake Issyk Kul, the second-largest mountain lake in the world and a major attraction and source of pride. Outside of a few villages, there is little sign of human presence, particularly on the lake’s southern shore.

Long History

Although Kyrgyzstan is a new country, the land and the people have a long and complex history, much of it determined by geography. The Tien Shan Range begins just south of Bishkek, where a spectacular series of snow-capped peaks is easily visible from embassy windows. Further south, the peaks rise to more than 24,000 feet along the border with China. Silk Road caravans followed the few passages through these mountains. For centuries, Persian kings and Turkic tribes battled for the territory. Genghis Khan captured the region in 1207. Later, the Russians were welcomed by some Kyrgyz tribes looking for protection from more threatening neighbors.



In 1936, Stalin created the Kyrgyz Republic and, in an effort to divide and conquer, set the borders that stand today. In the south and west, this wraps Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan around each other in a complex knot, isolating many Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik villages and complicating access to the Ferghana Valley, the most fertile and populous region in Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan did not greet independence from the Soviet Union with the same anti-Russian fervor as many other Soviet republics. Askar Akayev, a member of the USSR’s Supreme Soviet, was elected president in October 1991. Initially seen as relatively liberal, he was overthrown in 2005 by the Tulip Revolution, when Kurmanbek Bakiyev took over and began shifting power toward his home base in the South.

Last April, violent protests drove Bakiyev out. Since then, a caretaker government has been formed under Interim President Rosa Otunbaeva, and a June referendum changed the country from a presidential to parliamentary system. New parliamentary elections are slated for the fall.



Above: Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller holds the colorful puppets used in a highly successful anti-corruption campaign. **Below:** Kyrgyz women in the Naryn region whip wool for felt.

In early June, ethnic violence erupted in Osh, Jalalabad and other sections of the South. More than 300 people were killed, mainly ethnic Uzbeks, and hundreds of thousands briefly fled to Uzbekistan.

Since December 2001, the U.S. Air Force has operated the Transit Center at Manas, adjacent to Bishkek's international airport, to transport troops and fuel to and from Afghanistan. The closure to U.S. forces of a similar logistics hub in Uzbekistan in 2005 and

the difficulties of transporting goods through Pakistan add considerably to the Transit Center's importance and by extension to the U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan.

Vibrant Mission

The United States opened diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan in February 1992, when the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek moved into a building next to the former KGB headquarters. In 1998, it moved to its current building on the southern edge of town. The size and importance of the mission has grown steadily as the U.S. partnership with Kyrgyzstan deepens, and construction on a new embassy is expected to begin soon.

Camaraderie among the staff at this small post is one of the highlights of working here. People get together for Wednesday night basketball and Thursday night billiards or to visit the National Opera and Bishkek's many night spots. The mountains beckon just half an hour away, with hiking at Al Archa National Park and several other locations. There are ski stations within easy reach, and mountain trekking is available for the adventurous. And, of course, there is Lake Issyk Kul with its resorts and fantastic scenery. The community liaison office organizes horseback riding trips, white water rafting and outings to local artisans' shops and museums.



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Top: The U.S. Air Force Band "Falcon" plays for students in the square in front of the American University of Central Asia. **Middle:** Public Affairs Officer Kimberly McDonald meets young komuz players at a music school in Bishkek. **Bottom:** U.S. Embassy staff spend a day off at a ski base near Bishkek.

Kyrgyzstan may be a small country, but the mission's work is hardly small. This year, the staff of the embassy and the U.S. Agency for International Development have been dealing with the consequences of the events of April and June and the many challenges inherent in the nation's political and interethnic conflict.

PAS Activity

The public affairs section has supported local young people's campaigns to raise awareness of citizen responsibility for inter-ethnic peace and tolerance. One PAS-supported campaign focused on providing assistance to those most in need in the South. A

local organization set up a system to track aid shipments to ensure they reached their recipients. Ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller met with the young people who developed these creative projects, to encourage their efforts to support peace and healing in the country.

USAID has supported a Youth Theater for Peace program, training young people to use innovative theater techniques to bring peaceful change and new thinking to their towns and villages, which have been affected by recent conflict.

Youth and education have been major focuses of the mission for many years. The Millennium Challenge Account initiated a successful anti-corruption campaign using a colorful cast of Kyrgyz-speaking puppets in schools that is now a cartoon on national TV. The campaign educates children about the negative consequences of corruption at any level.

Sports diplomacy has reached a particularly vulnerable segment of youth. After a horrific plane crash in 2008, in which several members of a local youth basketball team were killed on their way to a tournament, the embassy sent the survivors on an exchange to the United States, where they met professional basketball players and American youth. Those young people and coaches have become vital partners for the United States in reaching out to at-risk youth through sports envoys and basketball programs that emphasize teamwork and playing by the rules.

The embassy is constantly approached by young people and teachers, many of whom have been introduced to English and America by Peace Corps volunteers. They want more English-language and American studies resources, and many children talk about studying in the United States under one of the many popular U.S. government exchange programs. To begin to meet this demand, the mission supports 10 American Pilot Schools throughout the country with modern English books, American resource centers and computer labs having Internet connectivity.





Men in Bishkek play Kok-boru, a team sport on horseback which is Kyrgyzstan's national game.

Educational Support

The United States also supports the development of American studies curriculum and resources for higher-education institutions, including the U.S.-supported American University of Central Asia in Bishkek. Ambassador Gfoeller recently gave a series of lectures there on democracy and the American Revolution, which encouraged students to discuss their country's development and think creatively about their

roles and responsibilities in their evolving democracy. The lecture was apparently well-received; the ambassador was asked for repeat performances at numerous universities around Bishkek.

USAID works on economic growth, health, education and the building of democratic institutions. In response to the violence in the South, the United States pledged \$48.6 million in emergency humanitarian assistance, including some

\$25 million in small grants and transitional assistance through USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives. Since the announcement of parliamentary elections, USAID and the embassy have played an important role in the lead-up to the voting.

So the Kyrgyz caravan is once again setting out across this fascinating country, traveling its ancient trails through narrow, twisting valleys and mountain passes. But whether all the pieces eventually fall in a line or not, the embassy is working hard to support the journey. ■

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At a Glance >>>

Kyrgyzstan



Capital: Bishkek

Government type: Republic

Area: 199,951 sq. km.

Comparative area: Slightly smaller than South Dakota

Population: 5.43 million

Official languages: Kyrgyz and Russian

GDP—per capita: \$870

Export commodities: Cotton, wool, meat, tobacco and gold

Export partners: Switzerland, Russia and Uzbekistan

Import commodities: Oil and gas, machinery, chemicals and food

Import partners: China, Russia and Kazakhstan

Currency (code): Soms (KGS)

Internet country code: .kg

Source: Country Background Notes