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Kyrgyzstan

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Introduction

Kyrgyzstan, often described as the “Switzerland of Central Asia,” is a country of dramatic mountainscapes, open-hearted nomadic traditions, and a history that stretches back for millennia. Tucked between some of Central Asia’s most powerful neighbors, Kyrgyzstan has forged its own vibrant identity at the crossroads of great civilizations. It is a land both ancient and youthful, marked by epic tales of warriors and herders, as well as resilient contemporary people forging their future amidst a rapidly changing world.

The purpose of this book is to present a comprehensive portrait of Kyrgyzstan. Beyond the images of snow-capped peaks and yurt-dotted valleys, this country offers a rich historical legacy that spans the Silk Road and the mighty Mongol empire, Russian and Soviet colonization, and the turbulence and aspiration of post-Soviet independence. Each era has left its imprint on the land, the people, and the society, weaving a singular tapestry of stories, challenges, and triumphs.

Today, Kyrgyzstan stands at a critical juncture. Since gaining independence in 1991, it has navigated a complex path between democracy and authoritarianism, experiencing moments of hope, upheaval, and resilience. The ongoing evolution of its political institutions, combined with a youthful demographic and ambitious economic goals, shapes both its promise and its vulnerabilities. Many Kyrgyz people now live or work abroad, with their remittances fueling local dreams and connecting the country ever more closely to the world.

In the pages that follow, readers will discover the multifaceted geography of Kyrgyzstan—a landscape of awe-inspiring mountains, alpine lakes, and fertile valleys. We will journey through the rich diversity of its peoples, languages, religions, and cultural traditions, from epic poetry to horsemanship, from everyday customs to high festivals. Alongside these, we will explore Kyrgyzstan’s present-day social challenges, from the struggle for human rights and gender equality to the impacts of labor migration and climate change.

Additionally, this book serves as a resource for travelers and the globally curious, offering insights into practicalities, experiences, and the lived realities of visiting Kyrgyzstan. Whether planning to traverse its ancient caravan routes or to get to know its vibrant cities, potential visitors will find guidance on what to expect and how best to engage with this remarkable place.

Above all, “Kyrgyzstan: Portrait of a Country” seeks to illuminate the complexities, contradictions, and continuous transformations that define this Central Asian nation.

Through a combination of history, analysis, storytelling, and practical advice, it invites readers to look beyond the headlines and the landscapes—to understand Kyrgyzstan as both a product of its past and an actor in its own unfolding present and future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Geography and Landscape

Kyrgyzstan is a country defined by its dramatic and imposing geography. Tucked away in the heart of Central Asia, it is a landlocked nation, sharing borders with Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the south, and China to the east and southeast. This central location has historically placed it at a crossroads of cultures and trade, shaping its unique identity.

The sheer dominance of mountains is the first and most striking feature of Kyrgyzstan's landscape. Approximately 93% of the country's territory is covered by the formidable Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. To put this in perspective, about 85% of Kyrgyzstan sits at an altitude of over 1,500 meters, and a remarkable 42% is even higher, above 3,000 meters above sea level. This makes Kyrgyzstan one of the most mountainous countries globally. The average elevation across the entire country is a lofty 2,750 meters (approximately 9,020 feet).

The Tian Shan, often translated as the "Celestial Mountains," is the dominant range, stretching an impressive 2,800 kilometers (1,740 miles) in length and reaching up to 800 kilometers (500 miles) in width. While this vast range extends across several countries, the majority of the Tian Shan system lies within Kyrgyzstan. The mountains are characterized by sharply uplifted peaks and deep, dramatic valleys, a testament to their geologically young formation.

Within the Tian Shan, several key sub-ranges carve out distinct regions. The Kyrgyz Ala-Too range lies to the west, and south of the capital city, Bishkek. North of Lake Issyk-Kul, the Kungey Ala-Too, or "Sunny Mountains," forms part of the border with Kazakhstan. Lining the southern shore of Issyk-Kul are the Terskey Ala-Too, known as the "Shady Mountains." Further east, along the border with China, runs the Kakshaal Tau range.

The country's highest point, Pobeda Peak (also known as Jengish Chokusu), stands proudly at 7,439 meters (24,406 feet) within the Kakshaal Too, which is the highest part of the Tian Shan. This makes Pobeda Peak the highest mountain in Kyrgyzstan and the northernmost peak in the world exceeding 7,000 meters. It's a challenging climb, even for experienced mountaineers, known for its harsh climate, strong winds, and sudden snowstorms.

In the southern reaches of Kyrgyzstan, particularly along the border with Tajikistan, the majestic Pamir Mountains contribute to the country's rugged topography. These mountains, which are among the world's highest, join the Tian Shan along the Alay Valley. The Chon Alai Range, in the south, is a notable part of the Pamir system within

Kyrgyzstan.

Beyond the towering peaks, Kyrgyzstan's landscape features an abundance of glaciers, alpine lakes, and deep valleys. The numerous glaciers are a significant source of water for the country's rivers. The Engilchek Glacier, at 62 kilometers long, is the largest in Kyrgyzstan and one of the longest outside the polar regions. In total, Kyrgyzstan is home to an estimated 6,500 distinct glaciers, covering about 4.2% of its territory.

Nestled amidst these mountains are approximately 2,000 lakes, most of which are located at altitudes between 3,000 and 4,000 meters. The largest and most famous is Issyk-Kul Lake, or Ysyk-Köl, located in the northeastern Tian Shan. It is not only the largest lake in Kyrgyzstan but also the second largest mountain lake in the world after Lake Titicaca. Issyk-Kul is a low-saline lake, and its name, meaning "hot lake" in Kyrgyz, refers to the fact that it never freezes, even in winter. The lake is a significant feature, with a surface area of 6,236 square kilometers and a maximum depth of 668 meters.

Other important lakes include Son-Kul and Chatyr-Kul, both located in the Naryn River Basin. Son-Kul, at an altitude of 3,016 meters, is the second largest lake in Kyrgyzstan, known for its stunning natural beauty and as a summer pasture for nomads. Chatyr-Kul, situated at 3,500 meters above sea level near the Kyrgyz-Chinese border, is another of the country's largest and highest lakes, often referred to as "Heavenly Lake." Sary Chelek Lake, located in a biosphere reserve, is considered one of Central Asia's most beautiful lakes.

While mountains dominate, less than 10% of Kyrgyzstan's land is cultivated. This arable land is primarily found in the northern lowlands and along the edges of the Fergana Valley. The Chüy, Talas, and Fergana valleys offer relatively flat land suitable for agriculture. The fertile Fergana Valley, which extends into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, plays a crucial role in Kyrgyzstan's agricultural activities. In 2020, the total cultivated area in Kyrgyzstan was approximately 1.2 million hectares.

Kyrgyzstan is also rich in water resources, earning it the nickname "Water Tower" of Central Asia. More than 40,000 rivers and streams crisscross the country, with a total length of about 150,000 kilometers. The Naryn River is the longest river entirely within Kyrgyzstan, stretching for 535 kilometers. It is formed by the confluence of the Big Naryn and Small Naryn rivers and flows through various valleys and gorges before merging with the Kara Darya outside Kyrgyzstan to form the Syr Darya, one of Central Asia's major rivers. The Chu River, another significant waterway, flows through the Chüy Valley in the north, passing near Bishkek. All of Kyrgyzstan's rivers flow into closed drainage systems, meaning their waters do not reach the sea. This intricate network of rivers and lakes, fed by glacial meltwater, is vital for agriculture and hydroelectric power generation within the country.

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