

KYRGYZSTAN



Official name: Kyrgyz Respublikasy (Kyrgyz);
Form of government: Republic with one legislative house (Jogorku Kenesh, or Supreme Council, 120)
Head of state: President Almazbek Atambayev
Head of government: Prime Minister: Sooronbay Jeenbekov
Capital: Bishkek
Official languages: Kyrgyz & Russian

Official religion: none
Monetary unit: Kyrgyzstan som (KGS)
Population: 6,083,000
Total area: (sq mi) 77,199
Urban-rural population:
Urban: 35.6%
Rural: 64.4%
Life expectancy:
Male: 66.2 years
Female: 74.8 year
GNI per capita (U.S.\$) 1,170

Introduction

Situated in the heart of Central Asia is the small independent republic of Kyrgyzstan. A nation rich in history and cultural tradition, Kyrgyzstan lies amid the formidable Tien Shan, a location that give it vast stretches of unspoiled natural regions. From 1924 to 1991 Kyrgyzstan was part of the Soviet Union.



Land and Climate

The mountain ranges of the Tien Shan system cover most of Kyrgyzstan. More than 8,000 glaciers are found at the highest elevations, while small areas of hot and cold deserts are found at lower elevations. Most settlements and agriculture are in the lowlands, which make up only one seventh of the country's area.

Its highest point is Victory Peak, at 24,406 feet (7,439 meters) tall. The country also includes Lake Issyk-Kul, one of the largest mountain lakes in the world, it measures 2,425 square miles in area and 2,303 feet in depth. The lake's name, which means "hot lake" in Kyrgyz, was most likely inspired because the water, though extremely cold, never freezes. Average temperatures in the lowlands range from 82° F (28° C) in summer to -0.5° F (-18° C) in winter; the highlands and mountains are much cooler.

Plants and Animals

More than 2,000 species of plants are found in Kyrgyzstan. The coniferous forests covering the north-facing mountain slopes are dominated by the Tien Shan white spruce (*Picea schrenkiana tianschanica*), a species unique to this region. At low to middle altitudes, nut and fruit trees such as walnut,

pistachio, and apple cover the slopes.



In the forests live brown bears, wild pigs, lynx, gray wolves, and ermines. Mountain sheep and goats,

deer, and snow leopards live in the valleys. Hares, yellow gophers, and large-eared hedgehogs live in the deserts. Birds of prey, including hawks, falcons, and eagles, are especially treasured by the Kyrgyz, who use the birds to assist in hunting. In the mountains also lives the lammergeier, a vulture whose strong, broad wingspan of up to 10 feet allows it to live at very high altitudes.

People and Culture

Like many other Central Asian ethnic groups, the Kyrgyz traditionally were a nomadic, pastoral people. The largest ethnic group in Kyrgyzstan, they are a Turkic people, and their language, Kyrgyz, belongs to the Kipchak group of Turkic languages. Russians and Uzbeks make up the largest minorities in Kyrgyzstan. The two official languages are Kyrgyz and Russian. During part of the Soviet period, Kyrgyz was written using the Cyrillic alphabet. The Roman alphabet was used between 1928 and 1940 and was reintroduced in 1992 after independence.

Kyrgyzstan's large rural population maintains a traditional lifestyle. Most live in yurts—round tents constructed with wooden racks and a domed roof and covered with heavy, waterproof felt cloth. School enrollment and literacy are high in Kyrgyzstan. Although not free, education is compulsory between the ages of seven and 15. Roughly three quarters of the population is Muslim, though there is a small minority of Christians.

The Kyrgyz are famous for their horses and their horsemanship. Kyrgyz horses are small, hearty animals whose endurance and adaptability in the rough terrain and extremes of temperature are legendary. The 1,000-year-old epic saga of Manas, a legendary folk hero, is frequently recited at festivals and plays an important part in the Kyrgyz national spirit.

Economy

The mountainous terrain that covers most of Kyrgyzstan makes much of the country unsuitable for crops. Despite this, agriculture is a mainstay of the economy. Most agricultural is the rearing of livestock, principally sheep and goats, which are raised for meat and wool. Dairy and beef cattle are important, as are horses. Among the most important crops raised are grains, hay, potatoes, vegetables, sugar beets, and cotton.

Kyrgyzstan is rich in minerals. It is an important source for nonferrous metals, notably antimony and mercury, much of which are exported. Gold mining has also become increasingly important to the national economy.

Manufacturing was a vital component of the national economy during the Soviet period. And though there was some decline after independence, it's still the second largest contributor to GDP. Some important manufactured products are processed foods and textiles, especially cotton and wool.



History

Experts believe that the earliest settlers in the land that is now Kyrgyzstan arrived as early as the 5th or 6th centuries B.C. The early Kyrgyz lived a nomadic life in tribal groups, living in relative seclusion in the forests of the Tien Shan. Their isolation separated them from many of the wars and other events that took place in Central Asia during the early Middle Ages.

However, by the 13th century their lands were invaded by Mongol warriors, and in 1207 the Kyrgyz surrendered to Jöchi, the son of Genghis Khan. His protection helped shield the Kyrgyz from other warring groups in the region. During this period and into the late 16th century, the Kyrgyz practiced shamanism, and their association with the Mongols kept them outside the reach of the Muslim invaders who were occupying other Central Asian lands.

In the 18th century, the Kyrgyz lands were seized by the Qing (Manchu) empire of China, but the Chinese allowed the Kyrgyz people a fair amount of freedom. Between 1825 and 1830, however, the Kyrgyz were conquered by Muhammad Ali, the leader of the Central Asian state of Kokand. He established the practice of Islam throughout the region. Because of a war between the two Kyrgyz clans, one side sought help from the Russians. But

by 1865, the Russians controlled much of the area.

Over the next 50 years or so, increased immigration by Russian settlers forced the Kyrgyz into the mountains. The Kyrgyz revolted against the Russians in 1916, but their actions brought swift and brutal suppression. The 1917 Russian Revolution brought further opposition to Soviet rule.

However, in 1926 the region was designated as an autonomous Soviet republic. Now called Kirgiziya, the land and its people underwent social changes. The nomadic groups were resettled amid land reforms and collectivization. In 1936 the country's designation was changed to a full union republic with the new name of Kirgiz Soviet Socialist Republic.

Tensions between the Kyrgyz and the Soviet regime escalated during the second half of the 20th century. Outbreaks of ethnic violence rocked the country as the Soviet Union began to weaken in 1990. Fighting broke out between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz over land distribution. Hundreds were killed during the unrest.

After gaining its independence on Aug. 31, 1991, the new republic, now called Kyrgyzstan, set about the task of economic and government reform. Askar Akayev, who had served as president of the Soviet Republic, was elected president of the new country. In 1992 Kyrgyzstan became a member of the United Nations and in 1998 was the first former Soviet country to join the World Trade Organization. Despite impressive progress made in implementing reforms, the country remained plagued by a generally low standard of living into the early 21st century.

FUN FACTS

- The name of Kyrgyzstan comes from the Kyrgyz word meaning “we are forty”, a possible reference to the 40 clans which unified to form the country. (And on its flag, there are 40 points on the sun.)
- “Manas,” a narration of the migration of the Kyrgyz under the Manas leadership, is one of the world’s longest epic poems.
- Its Inylchek Glacier is one of the largest glaciers in the world.
- Kyrgyzstan is one of the few countries that have a currency with a denomination of three.