

Designation: Jyrgalan #3

Title: Ak-Suu Traverse

Time: 7d / 6n

Distance: 97.13km

Max Elevation: 3886m

Min Elevation: 2034m

Total Gain/Loss: 6847m+ / 7267m-

Months Passable: June - October

Short Description: Cross the high passes across the entire Ak-Suu region, starting near the Kazakh border in Jyrgalan and finishing beyond Karakol under the red rocks of Jeti-Öguz, passing en route myriad glaciers, mountain lakes, and pristine mountain valleys.

Day 1

Time: 4.5 hr

Distance: 12.5 km

Max Elevation: 3083m

Min Elevation: 2271m

Total Gain/Loss: 812 m+ / 0 m-

Campsite: 42°30'36.46" N, 78°58'53.48" E

Leaving the village of Jyrgalan, cross the small bridge at the bottom of town and follow the web of livestock trails as they trend south up the hill to the base of an old electric tower, and continue the gentle climb up the Jyrgalan valley parallel to the river of the same name. After 6km, at the intersection of a branch valley where yurts often appear during the summer months, turn right and follow the Terim-Tör Bulak river as it rises away from the main valley. After another 3km of easy uphill, a potential side trip options turns west off the main trail just before it passes through a cleft rock and crosses a small stream.

Side Trip:

Time: 2.5 hr

Distance: 4 km

Max Elevation: 3329m

Min Elevation: 2911m

Total Gain/Loss: 418 m+ / 408 m-

It's a steep unmarked climb from the main path to a small basin at the foot of Tabylgy-Tör Mountain and the milky lake that fills much of it, and the climb of 418m over just 2km of hiking will have your legs burning by the time you get there. Head back down the same way you came, but look after the last grove of trees for an easy cut-through to cross the stream and catch the main trail on a rise instead of descending fully.

After crossing the stream, the shaded sides of which make a lovely spot to break for lunch, it's only three kilometers further to the foot of the Terim-Tör Bulak pass and first night's campsite. During spring and early summer this area often fills with meltwater to form a string of tiny ponds, against which the mountain backdrop and occasional herds of grazing horses make a spectacular scene.

Day 2

Time: 8 hr

Distance: 16.5 km

Max Elevation: 3473m

Min Elevation: 2650m

Total Gain/Loss: 1187 m+ / 1079 m-

Campsite: 42°27'06.25" N, 78°51'35.04" E

Departing camp (3085m) at the foot of the Terim-Tör Bulak pass (3473m), count on around an hour and a half for the 2.7km climb to the top. There's no reliable water source until the river at the bottom of the Türgön Ak-Suu valley another 3.7km ahead, so from the campsite carry enough water to last the first 3.5 or 4 hours of walking for the day. On a clear day the peaks of the Terskey Ala-Too range rise to the southeast and southwest, though Khan-Tengri's dominant silhouette is still too far to see. Descending from the pass, try to stay to the left (south) of the seasonal riverbed to keep the easiest slope. At the bottom of the valley (2650m), cross the A364 highway (which heads North back towards Karakol and South to Inilchek village and glacier) and look for the rickety wooden bridge that affords a dry crossing of the large river.

Climbing from the valley floor to the 3363m Boz-Uchuk Ashuu pass is fairly gentle, though the 5km between the two can make the afternoon feel long. Stop along the way for lunch, and once the eastward trending valley makes a hard turn to the south the top is only 1km further on. Rather than following the obvious path from the top of the pass down hill into the Boz-Uchuk valley, follow the left-hand ridge of mountains south to a small lake and continue along the same path to loop around the small ridge extension and onwards to the two even more beautiful Boz-Uchuk lakes. Set up camp NW of the larger lake, just at the top of the last steep wall before the lakes.

If you've arrived early enough to still have some daylight, the northern tip of the stubby ridge that marks the western boundary of the valley below offers fine sunset views facing back towards the Issyk-Kol basin, though many find it hard to tear themselves away from the Boz-Uchuk Lakes.

Day 3

Time: 6 hr

Distance: 4.42km km

Max Elevation: 3669m

Min Elevation: 2760m

Total Gain/Loss: 828 m+ / 1432 m-

Campsite: 42°23'35.98" N, 78°43'10.28" E

Side Trip:

Time: 3 hr

Distance: 4.5 km

Max Elevation: 3482m

Min Elevation: 3377m

Total Gain/Loss: 105 m+ / 105 m-

If you can manage an early start, sunrise at the smaller of the two Boz-Uchuk lakes makes an excellent start to day three. Circle around the rockier eastern side of the valley to avoid the bogs of the west, climbing past the rock outcrop that dominates the larger first lake and then beyond to the shore of the second. It's only about a half hour up and half an hour back down, but sunrise lovers and photographers will spend twice that on the round-trip as they soak in the views.

Back to camp, the day's route starts by crossing the small ridge immediately West of camp and descending to the main valley floor below. Follow the trail uphill as it parallels the river for around 2km before crossing and heading more steeply uphill to the obvious pass in the distance at 3524m. From the top, the Jergez valley spreads out below and an excellent view of Tashtanbek Tor Bashi peak dominates the southern horizon. Expect about 2 hours from leaving camp to reaching the top of the pass. From the pass, the trail continues on towards the first Ailanysh Lake (at 3445m), already visible to the SW across the valley, via the Jergez river and up the first stretch of the Ailanysh valley. The rocky shore of the lake and the small river that flows down the valley near here are the last reliable places to fill up with water for the last hour up to the pass, as further up the stagnant second lake flows out only via tiny streams. The climb steepens past the second lake for the last 180m or so of vertical rise, up to the Ailanysh Pass at 3676m, but the incline eases considerably on the way back down the other side to the Ak-Suu Almaluu valley below.

About 5km into this final descent of the day, as the trail curves to just above the main branch of the Ak-Suu river, look for a viewpoint with unbelievable views down towards an unnamed 3855m peak and the blinding snowy whiteness of the Ak-Suu Wall's glaciated slopes. Take your time here to soak up the view, as it's just a little over 2km further to tonight's campsite near a wooden footbridge that crosses the Ak-Suu river. This last stretch passes by several shepherds' camps in summer, ending in a relatively flat plain before the bridge or on a hilly campsite just across with access to a small stream whose waters are much clearer than the glacier runoff of the main Ak-Suu. Either way this is popular pasture territory, so be sure to treat all water consumed here.

Day 4

Time: 6 hr

Distance: 13.1 km

Max Elevation: 3695m

Min Elevation: 2521m

Total Gain/Loss: 965 m+ / 1216 m-

Campsite: 42°22'14.10" N, 78°36'47.49" E

Today's a relatively easy day, distance-wise, but it begins with an 800m+ climb that traces up the valley that begins just W of the wooden footbridge over the Ak-Suu river. It's a calf-burning 2 hours or so to the top of the 3606m pass, but once there don't miss the opportunity to drop packs and continue up to the obvious nearby summit to the SE, which tops out at 3718m with excellent 360-degree views of the surrounding peaks.

At the point where the path down from the pass descends to the river it's possible to cross and make a climb up 200m to a small lake, but it's less visually impressive than others on the hike and so many will skip it. Regardless of your choice here, the main trail continues along the East side of the river to the main Ak-Suu Arashan valley, ignoring the wooden bridge around halfway down, to the collection of guesthouses at Altyn Arashan.

There are several potential campsites to the South of the guesthouses in the direction of towering Peak Palatka, but the short day is also a good chance to splurge on a guesthouse bed (300-400som) or take a dip in the hot springs (200som) that have made the valley locally famous since before the Soviet era. Rest up tonight, because tomorrow is a long but rewarding uphill day.

Day 5

Time: 8 hr

Distance: 12.3 km

Max Elevation: 3886m

Min Elevation: 2516m

Total Gain/Loss: 1447 m+ / 402 m-

Campsite: 42°19'09.99" N, 78°31'42.73" E

From Altyn Arashan, cross the large bridge over to the West side of the Ak-Suu river and continue South for just over 2km to the first large valley that rises off to the Southwest. The trail along this popular hike is quite easy to follow, though do look out for the fairly obvious river crossing (which can be harder to spot definitively for hikers from the opposite direction). From the turn out of the Arashan valley it's around an 8km uphill that rises from 2570m at the valley floor to 3906m at the Ala-Kol North pass, with the last 200m of elevation feeling nearly-vertical as it rises through loose scree over which two obvious paths have been stomped out by the multitude of hikers that hike up Issyk-Kol's most popular trekking route.

The views from the top of the pass are something sublime, though, taking in an incredible panorama of 5000m+ peaks and the breadth of Ala-Kol lake.

From the pass it's around 2km to the Ak-Sai company's camping area or on a little further to the Western edge of the lake where there's room for a handful of tents.

Day 6

Time: 8 hr

Distance: 11.1 km

Max Elevation: 3789m

Min Elevation: 2567m

Total Gain/Loss: 966 m+ / 1391 m-

Campsite: 42°16'43.60" N, 78°27'37.75" E

From camp, continue to the W end of the lake to where a deceptively small stream empties into a surprisingly large waterfall – though you'll have to descend from the lake's plateau to get a good glimpse of the cascades. Most tourists will continue downhill here to the Karakol Valley via the Sirota hut, but loop instead around the curve of the lake along a small path which is visible from afar that climbs from the lake along a rockfall to the 3781m Panorama Pass. The trail is much better footing than it appears from far away, with the exception of the steepest bit where it turns directly towards the path, and it's only around 2 hours from the Ak-Sai campsite to the pass (including long photo stops at the lake shore and waterfall). It's an easy walk from the pass up to a 3843m rock outcrop, from which the views of the three major peaks of the region are even better than at the pass. From East to West across the horizon the most obvious summits are Djigit Peak (5178m), Karakol Peak (5216m), and Öguz-Bashi Peak (5126m).

Rest up at the pass, because the descent starts down rockfall and then continues along slippery and overgrown vegetation most of the way down to a bridge across the Karakol River (2540m) far below. Expect around two hours for the full 4km of hiking, more if you're generally slow on downhills. Your knees will probably need a break by the time you've reached the valley, so break for lunch here and rebuild your strength for the next (easy, luckily) climb.

From the bridge, head up the valley around 1km to where a path branches up the Telety Valley. The main valley continues from here to the foot of Peak Karakol and the Ontor Glacier, the last bit over a path-less rocky scramble, but this is best accomplished as an additional day on the itinerary rather than as a short radial hike. The main trail turns steeply up the Telety Valley towards the last pass of the trek, though it only stays steep for around half an hour before levelling out into a gentle climb through most of the valley. The valley is spoiled for choice of campsites, but for views it's hard to beat a long flat area about halfway up the valley where the river broadens briefly, with great panoramas of Telety to the Southwest and back towards Ala-Kol's passes to the Northeast.

Day 7

Time: 11 hr

Distance: 27.21 km

Max Elevation: 3781m

Min Elevation: 2034m

Total Gain/Loss: 642 m+ / 1747 m-

Campsite: N/A

Pack up camp and head up the valley on the week-long trek's last uphill section – to the 3792m Telety Pass it's less than two easy hours (though the way does get a little steeper on that last bit), continuing down another hour and a half to the river valley on the far side (around 7km from camp to pass to river).

From here you're firmly back in shepherd territory; expect to see quite a few as you carry on the last 20km back to Jeti-Öguz resort. It's an easy downward stroll, with bridges at each river crossing and eventually a dirt road that serves occasional trucks coming up the jailoo and more frequent tourist busses coming up for daytrips. There are clusters of tourist yurts around the popular Kok-Jaiyk jailoo, if you'd like to extend your time in the area another night, but for many the crowds of tourists after so much time in remote mountains will be reason enough to slog on down all the way to the gates of the Jeti-Öguz Sanatoria where public transport (share taxis and the occasional minibus) return to Karakol.