



Russia - Shamans of the Siberian Altai

DETAILED DOSSIER

18 day itinerary: Moscow – Barnaul – Altai Mountains (Tungur, Katun river, Ak Kem river, Tekelu & Yarlou valleys Ak Kem glacier, Mount Belucha, Karatyurek pass, Kucherla, Tungur) – Barnaul – Moscow

Start date: 5th August 2006

INTRODUCTION

The hauntingly beautiful Altai Mountains straddle the border between Siberia and Mongolia, and are an area of untrammelled natural beauty. There are claims, made by among others the famous Russian mystic Nicholas Roerich, that deep within the mountains is the site of Shambala, an earthly paradise prophesised in Tibetan scriptures. Others say that this is the place where the final battle between good and evil will one day be fought. What can definitely be said is that here in the warmth of the long summer months Siberia belies its icy reputation, springing to life to become a 'ecological wonderland' for those who enjoy the challenges of wilderness trekking.

Following old hunters' trails we trek across rivers and meadows, beside waterfalls and lakes, through an unspoilt Alpine environment rich in wildlife. Ornithologists and entomologists will be rewarded by the sight and sound of abundant bird and insect species that are to be found in and around the glacial lakes and evergreen forest.

This 11-day trek explores an area little known to Western trekkers high in the Altai mountains surrounding Mt Belucha, less than 100 miles from the border with Mongolia. Our journey through the Gorno-Altai region begins among the tree-lined boulevards and Mediterranean-style pavement cafes of the charming Altai town of Barnaul. Although officially part of Russia the people of the Altai are ethnically very different from their Russian compatriots and many still practice a form of Shamanism. As well as getting a rare and close-up glimpse of rural life in Siberia – including a 'Russian sauna' in a remote mountain lodge – we will also spend a day in the 'centre of power' exploring the historic squares and cathedrals of Moscow.



The Oriental Caravan



tel +44 (0)20 7582 0716

info@theorientalcaravan.com

ITINERARY

Day 1 Moscow Group rendezvous in Moscow. The group will meet up in the early evening for a trip briefing over dinner. After dinner we make our way to the airport for the overnight flight to Barnaul. *Overnight – en avion*

Day 2 Barnaul Following our early morning arrival in Barnaul* we will be met at the airport and transferred to our centrally located hotel. For many people Barnaul is their favourite city in Siberia, and its relaxed, friendly and easygoing atmosphere seems far removed from the social, political and economic stresses of distant Moscow. Trams still ply the streets of Barnaul, and much of the city's architecture is pre-modern and constructed from wood in the classic Siberian style. During our day in town, having allowed some time to relax after the overnight flight, we will make a visit to one or both of the city's two museums, both of which have some interesting archaeological finds and provide a useful glimpse into ethnic Altai culture. Most pleasant of all though is to do as the locals do and just wander along the tree-lined Lenina Prospekt Boulevard on a balmy summer's evening, stopping for a drink or two in one of the many Mediterranean-style pavement cafes. (*At around 0700 local time – please note that Barnaul is 3 hours ahead of Moscow). *Overnight hotel*

Day 3 Tungur Today we have an early start, as we set off on a full day's drive through the Gorno-Altai region to our base camp at Vsyotnik. Although the landscape is initially quite flat or made up of rolling farmland we soon find ourselves entering a more mountainous and often magical landscape. With the impressive Katun River to our right we eventually come to the largest settlement on our route, the provincial capital of Gorno-Altai. Beyond here the villages are quite small and rambling, populated mainly by ethnic Altai people but also with a significant population of Russians. En route we come across evidence of the old shamanistic culture of the region with people tying bits of clothing to trees to placate the spirits and ensure safe passage, or collecting holy water from streams. The Shamans of the Altai suffered greatly from the excesses of Stalinism but in recent years there has been a resurgence of this ancient religion which believes that the world is pervaded by good and evil spirits who can only be influenced and controlled by Shaman priests. As we get closer to our destination the road conditions deteriorate somewhat but fortunately any discomfort is more than ameliorated by the astounding scenery through which we pass. In the late afternoon or early evening we arrive at the village of Tungur and cross the rickety old suspension bridge to meet our hosts at 'Vsyotnik', the charming and friendly mountain lodge that will be the base for our trek into the Altai. On arrival there will be a welcome dinner and we will have our first taste of a *banya*, a Russian sauna – the perfect way to relax after a long journey. There is even a small bar with, amazingly for the remoteness of the location, cold beer on tap! *Overnight – mountain lodge*

Day 4 Katun Valley & Ak Kem Our lodge, made up of various wooden chalets in the Russian style, is situated in a beautiful location on the banks of the Katun River, and is a great place for swimming, or just spending the morning relaxing and preparing for the days ahead. In the afternoon we board a raft for a couple of hours downriver journey to a point where the Ak Kem River meets the main Katun River. In fine weather this short easy journey can be quite magical as we drift down a steep sided, forested valley unchanged for millennia. The rafting is very easy and fine for complete beginners. For those who don't wish to take to the waters however land alternatives to the raft are available. En route we may pull up to the riverbank and go on a short walk to see a collection of ancient 'Baba' stones, intriguing relics of a culture that inhabited these parts a thousand and more years ago. We leave the raft and, after meeting up with our daypacks, begin our trek with a short two or three hour walk to our first camp, in a beautiful meadow by the Oroktoy brook. It is here too that we will meet up again with our horsemen and horses. *Overnight – camp*

Day 5 Tukhman River During the first half of the trek we are following an old hunter's trail, and are unlikely to meet other people apart from the occasional shepherd or hunter. This morning we start off following a gentle forest path alive with the fruits of summer as we pass by bushes of raspberries, red currants and honeysuckle before starting to ascend quite rapidly through a forest of thick Siberian *taiga*. The woods here are a cornucopia of mushrooms and berries, and in the days ahead our cook will no doubt educate us in the deliciousness of all these wild foods. After emerging from beneath the forest canopy we reach an area of Alpine meadow which provides breathtaking, panoramic views of the surrounding slopes and valley. There is also a good chance that we will see some wildlife including Siberian deer, marmot and according to the shepherds, the occasional bear. Tonight we make camp at the edge of a huge bowl with spectacular views of Siberia's highest mountain, Belucha, and its surrounding peaks. *Overnight – camp*

Day 6 Mount Belucha A long but gentler walk today that takes us across Alpine meadows and mountain streams, through an area inhabited by elk and wild goats. For much of the day we will be able to see, in the distance, the majestic snow walls of Mt Belucha (4,506m), the highest mountain in the region and popular with climbers. After walking through an area of thick gorse we ascend a small pass from where we can see the small mountain lakes by which we will make our camp for the night. *Overnight – camp*

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ITINERARY *continued*

Day 7 Tekelu Valley A much shorter day today as we walk from our lakeside camp up to a marshy plateau to reach some strange wind-eroded rock formations. (For those who wish it is possible to scramble to the top of these rocks for more great views of the surrounding countryside). After an initially gentle descent, with Mount Belucha towering ahead of us, the path steepens as we make our way down into the Tekelu Valley. In the Altai language *teke* means goat, and the craggy cliffs that flank the valley are home to many of these wild and hardy animals. After lunch at camp, it should be possible to walk up the valley to the mighty Tekelu Waterfalls. The walk is not long, but is mostly through some quite thick woodland, and on carpets of thick, springy moss that can make the going quite slow. Alternatively, it is possible to rest back at camp on the banks of the Tekelu River. *Overnight – camp*

Day 8 Yarlou Valley Once across the river we soon find ourselves ascending through quite steep woods that soon give way to a gentler incline. From here we can see the Tekelu Waterfall in the distance, and the beautiful valley that feeds into it from above that was yesterday hidden from view. As we reach the top of this pass we get our first good views of the Ak Kem Valley. After a short descent we undulate through pastures of short coarse bush before descending into the Yarlou Valley. The Yarlou Valley, which feeds into the Ak Kem, is considered by UFOlogists to be a regular landing spot for intergalactic visitors. With a lot of imagination – but only then – it is quite possible to see what they mean. As we approach the Yarlou Valley we get our first views of the broad Belucha glacier that flows into the very beautiful Ak Kem Lake (1,950m). There is a helicopter rescue station at the lake – which supports the climbing teams that attempt to summit Belucha – and it is here, after days of just us and ‘the great outdoors’, that we see our first signs of civilisation. A local boatman will then take us across the lake in his rowing boat, and a little further downstream we will arrive at our fixed camp where, for the duration of our stay, we will be the only guests. The camp is manned by a couple of staff from Vsyotnik and has a great, and very welcome, *banya* sauna – just the place to soothe tired limbs. It also has an *ail*, a traditional Altai building somewhat equivalent to a wooden *yurt*. *Overnight – fixed camp*

Days 9 & 10 Ak Ojouk Valley & Ak Kem glacier We have two full days based in the Ak Kem Valley, and therefore time to rest, and time to explore the surrounding landscape. There are several half day and one day hikes that can be made from our camp. On one side of the lake is Ak Ojouk Valley, which is famous for its seven lakes – each one, it is said, having its own colour and specific water characteristics. On the other side of the valley is the ‘Lake of Mountain Spirits’ which has associations with the mystic Roerich. Another possible trek, but one which involves quite a lot of ‘rock-hopping’, is the walk to the Ak Kem glacier (2,600m) and an unusual grotto which is the origin of the Ak Kem river. From the lake there are great views of Belucha’s icy cliffs which, at sunset, seem to almost be aflame. *Overnight – fixed camp*

Day 11 Karatyurek Pass & Kucherla River Today is a long day, and we start early in order to make our ascent of Karatyurek (3,060m) – the mighty pass that separates us from the Kucherla Valley. Looking back there are more stunning views of Belucha before we reach the top of the pass and begin a rapid descent, following a sometimes rocky trail, to our campsite amidst trees near to a tributary of the Kucherla River. *Overnight – camp*

Day 12 Kucherla Lake We emerge into the broad Kucherla Valley, and continue along a forest trail, ever in earshot of the mighty rapids that thunder down from the lake that is our ultimate destination for today. By the end of the day we will have reached the top of a small pass and will be looking out onto the dazzling turquoise waters and thickly wooded hills of Kucherla Lake – one of the most beautiful vista in all of Siberia. *Overnight – camp*

Day 13 & 14 Kucherla Valley & Tungur For the next two days we follow the course of the Kucherla River, through lush Altai forest, back to our base-camp at Tungur. At one point we come across evidence of earlier civilisations in the form of ancient petroglyphs displaying predominantly ibex, at what was probably some kind of a temple site for early man. The valley eventually opens out onto a deceptively long field leading to Kucherla village, and our base camp at Vsyotnik, where there will be time to relax and take another welcome *banya* during the afternoon, before we all meet up for a farewell meal. *Overnight – camp & mountain lodge*

Day 15 Tungur A full day to relax at our idyllic and friendly Base Camp. As well as opportunities for swimming and further short hikes, Tungur is a great place to just unwind, enjoy the local cooking and and soak up the peacefulness of this remote and charming area.

Day 16 Barnaul Today we drive back to Barnaul and spend the evening at leisure. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 17 Moscow In the morning we board our flight back to Moscow, where we will be met by our local representative. For the rest of the day we will explore and discover the old and new faces of Russia’s capital. Perhaps reflecting the situation as a whole in post-Soviet Russia, Moscow is a city of great vitality as well as great charm. Today our itinerary will include visits to Red Square, the Kremlin and possibly one of the many impromptu street markets which seem to have supplanted the old state department stores. *Overnight – hotel*

Day 18 Moscow & journey’s end.

The Oriental Caravan heads home...

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Price (excluding international flights) – £1,580 per person on a twin share basis

Price includes... the services of local guides and trek leader, and a trek leader from The Oriental Caravan; all transport (including airport transfers); all accommodation; all meals on trek and at the lodge in Tungur; portage (by horse) on the trek; entrance fees to the Museum of Regional Ethnography in Barnaul and the Kremlin (but not the Armoury or other sub-museums) in Moscow; use of the *banya* at Vsyotnik and Ak-Kem.

Group size & Leader Minimum group size is six, maximum twelve. The group will be accompanied by an English-speaking Russian guide, a cook and a trek leader from The Oriental Caravan. Porterage will be by horse, lead by local horsemen. In Moscow there will be an English-speaking guide and a representative from our local agent to assist with transfers. There will also be support staff available at the base camp in Tungur.

Transport In Moscow we will use a minibus for airport transfers and sightseeing. Transfers to and from Barnaul airport and to and from Tungur will also be by minibus.

Accommodation In Moscow we stay in a centrally located, three-star tourist hotel. While in Barnaul we stay at the comfortable Hotel Tsentralnaya, just off Sovetov Square, ideally placed for Lenina Prospekt boulevard. At the lodge in Tungur we stay in chalet-style accommodation with a maximum of four beds to a room. On the trek we camp in two person tents. (Participants should be prepared at times to assist with the making and breaking of camp). Due to space and weight restrictions it may not always be possible to arrange single occupancy of the tents so all participants should be willing to share, depending on the size of the group. Single rooms are however available in Moscow and Barnaul on request, and on payment of a supplement of £58.

Food All meals on trek and at the lodge in Tungur are included. In Moscow breakfast is included. On the trek each person will carry his own packed lunch, and in the evening we will be cooking in the 'Russian-style' over an open fire. As well as pasta, bread, rice, meat, cheese and vegetables we may also make use of the abundant wild berries and other foods growing around us in the forest. At each meal there will be food suitable for vegetarians.

Trek conditions Although there is nothing difficult or dangerous about this trek there are a number of quite long walking days, and participants should therefore have a reasonable level of fitness and stamina. We follow established trails through the mountains but the path can often be rocky and, in wet weather, quite muddy.

Weather Daytime temperatures are generally quite high, and when the sun is shining it is possible to trek in T-shirt and shorts. The nights however can be cold, although generally the temperature stays above freezing. Rainfall, sometimes for extended periods, is possible at anytime.

Health Formalities There are no statutory vaccination requirements for visiting Russia. It is however strongly recommended that you consult your doctor or travel clinic prior to departure and seek their advice regarding elective immunisation and any other health considerations for travel to these areas. There is a small risk of tick-borne encephalitis throughout Siberia and much of the Far East. At the time of year when we visit this risk is reduced but it is recommended that individual group members are vaccinated against such an eventuality.

Insurance It is a condition of travelling with The Oriental Caravan that each group member be insured against medical and personal accident risks (including the cost of repatriation) and have adequate baggage cover. In addition, it is strongly recommended that all travellers take out cancellation insurance at the time of booking to cover their costs should they need to cancel prior to departure, for health reasons or as a result of certain other events impacting their domestic life or employment. This policy should of course cover such activities as trekking. (The Oriental Caravan is able to provide details of a suitable single/multi-trip insurance policy, available direct from our broker – please ask for details).

Passport & Visa All nationalities require a passport valid for at least six months beyond the date of final departure from Russia. All group members will require a visa to enter Russia. The Oriental Caravan will assist with obtaining the visa which will require a letter of invitation from our hosts in Russia. (Please note that the cost of the visa is not included in the tour price). Further details will be sent on booking.

Special Equipment All participants will need strong waterproof boots, a 4-season sleeping bag (or 3-season bag with liner), a sleeping mat and a 3/4-season waterproof jacket. Further details on 'what to pack' will be given in the *Pre-Departure Information* that will be sent to all group members.

This dossier, and the itinerary it describes, have been carefully compiled and are provided in good faith. As with any such journey to a remote destination unusual and unexpected conditions can occur at any time and this type of tour can be subject to unforeseen changes; to fully enjoy this kind of travel it is, on occasion, necessary for participants to be prepared to adopt a certain amount of flexibility.

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