



Bishkek

Prepared by
Iraj Bashiri

Copyright (c) Iraj Bashiri, 1998

Bishkek, one of the youngest capitals of the former Soviet Union, is now the capital of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. Situated in the north, in the valley of the Chu river, the only large city of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek enjoys a good climate during both the summer and winter seasons. A well-maintained highway (about five hours by bus) connects the capital city to the sandy beaches and the warm, therapeutic waters of [Lake Issyk Kul](#) to the east.



Chuy Street early in the morning; copyright, Iraj Bashiri, 2000

Originally, Bishkek was called Pishpek. In 1926, Pishpek became the capital of the Kirghiz Autonomous Republic. In 1936, as the capital of the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic, Pishpek was renamed Frunze in honor of a major political organizer of the Civil War era called Mikhail Vasilievich Frunze (1885-1925) who was born in Pishpek into a Moldavian family. A statue of Frunze, riding a horse, is installed at the end of Erkindik Prospekt, near the train station; the Mikhail Frunze Memorial House Museum serves as a shrine to the Red Army hero. In 1991, Frunze was renamed Bishkek.



Today, Bishkek is a modern city with vast squares, crowded bazaars, impressive administrative centers, and educational institutions. As the major industrial center of the republic, Bishkek's factories produce leather goods, agricultural machinery, and a variety of textiles.

Many public parks, restaurants, museums, and cinemas dot the map of the city. Among the major places of interest are: the History Museum, the Fine Arts Museum, and the Kyrgyz Economic Achievement Exhibition. Specializing in Kyrgyz culture, the museums display the life history of the Kyrgyz from their nomadic days when the *yurt* and the *tunduk* were common terms to contributions of the Kyrgyz, men and women, to the war effort in the 1940's. The struggle of the Kyrgyz for independence that followed *glasnost'* and *perestroika* is understood best in the context of their 1000th anniversary of Manas. The residents of Bishkek rehearsed this major event for at least two years, wearing native clothes, displaying life in the *yurt*, and dancing to national tunes. Indeed, in 1995, the Kyrgyz government built a whole village--Manas Village--to demonstrate the historical significance of the efforts of Manas and his forty warrior companions (*kirkchoro*) in uniting all Kyrgyz tribes and in preserving the integrity of the Kyrgyz culture.



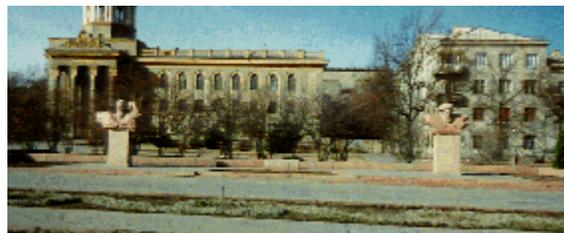
The Victory (Pobedy) Monument constitutes yet another site in Bishkek that must not be overlooked. The 1985 monument consists of three curved spires of granite outlining a *yurt*. The *yurt*, the moveable home of the Kyrgyz nomad, has forty frame posts which converge, like spikes on a wheel, at the top, leaving an opening or *tunduk* for the sun to shine in. The coming together of the frameposts at the *tunduk* symbolizes family unity. Any pole missing symbolizes a loss in the family. Using this potent symbol of Kyrgyz culture, the Soviet artist recalls the losses of the Union to Nazi Germany. The eternal flame on which the "*yurt*" stands, the actual hearth of the *yurt*, accentuates the distress of a Kyrgyz woman depicted waiting for a loved one to return from the war.

Walking down the streets of Bishkek and talking to the Kyrgyz, many names are mentioned that are not at all familiar to the Westerners' ears. The most celebrated among those names are the names of Manas and Togtogul Satilganov. The statue of the former, the founder of the Kyrgyz nation, graces the square in front of the Kyrgyz State Philharmonic while the statue of the latter graces the yard of the Opera and Ballet Theater.

The epic *Manas*, of which Manas is the main character, was first written down by Chokan Valikhanov, a Kazakh. Valikhanov's account was based on the information that he had received from the *manaschis* or reciters of the epic who had inherited it from their ancestors in a celebrated chain of oral transmission.



Both the life of Manas and the lives of the *Manaschis* or bards who recite the heroic deeds of Manas are celebrated in the complex in the center of the city. The statue of Manas (completed in 1981) is placed against the backdrop of the white marble of the monumental Philharmonia building. It depicts Manas, Kyrgyzstan's legendary hero, while riding his magic steed, Ak-Kula, and slaying a dragon. Below, to his right is his wife and counselor, Kanykei, dressed in national Kyrgyz dress worn by some married women of Kyrgyzstan even today. To his left is his advisor, the sage Bakai, also in traditional Kyrgyz clothing. The *Manaschis* are depicted as they would sit in the *yurt* and recite the deeds of the founder of the Kyrgyz nation.



The bard Sayakbay is depicted performing a recitation. The collective statues of the *manaschis*, along with the statue of their object of praise, placed high above them, fill the Kyrgyz passersby and others with admiration. They are also filled with the spirit of the old culture and of the promise that the heroic deeds of Manas represent.

Cast in bronze by Gapar Aitiev in 1974, the statue of Toktogul Satylganov (1864-1933) is located in a fairly secluded part of town. In those days the bard, who had developed his special skills from his childhood days, was invited by the shepherds and townspeople alike to perform in their celebrations. His favorite Komuz, the three-stringed lute he carried with him wherever he performed, is now on display at the History Museum, a couple of blocks away from the statue.

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



Togtogul Satilganov
holding his favorite instrument, the komuz

The Kyrgyz White House is located on Chuy Avenue between the Philharmonia building and the Monument to the Martyrs of Revolution. Built in 1985 as the Headquarters of the Communist Party's Central Committee, the White House accommodates the president's office. recognized as one of the more stable seats in the Central Asian game of post-Soviet rulership, it was in this building that Askar Akayev "studied the situation" while the Union was being swept away by the 1991 coup and the winds of change.



Counterbalancing Manas on Chuy Avenue is the Ala-Too Square. In the square, against the impressive building of the Historical Museum, stands the only statue of Lenin to be displayed in a major public square (there are statues of Lenin in Parks both in Alma-Ata and Dushanbe). In 1984, when the statue was erected, the builders had to hide the Ilbris factories which faced the statue. To mask the factories from visitors, an array of marble colonnades were built across the entire south side of the square. Today, those marble colonnades serve as the entrance to various boutiques selling western-style clothing and cosmetics.



The Monument to the Martyrs of Revolution is an unforgettable site in Bishkek.

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Completed in 1978 by Turgunbai Sadykov (winner of All Union Lenin Prize), the statue of Urkuya Salieva hovers over smaller memorials to the revolutionary heroes and over an entire square. In the tradition of Kyrgyz women who spearheaded work on the southern collectives, Salieva organized the Kyzyl Asker or Red Soldier Collective in 1929. Soon after, she and her husband were murdered by wealthy *bais* who feared that they would lose all their property to the collectives.



The Kyrgyz speak both Russian (official language) and Kyrgyz (state language). They are predominantly Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi sect. The capital, however, is not as much oriented toward religion as is the town of Osh to its southwest. Away from the Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, the inhabitants of the capital attend to their religious and secular concerns as they see fit. The Bishkek Mosque, Built in 1886, is one of the oldest structures erected in Bishkek. In recent years, the mosque has been renovated to meet the needs of the faithful as they return to the fold.

In addition, Bishkek is the home of the Aitmatov family. Although the family lost its head to Stalin's purges in the 1930's, its son, Chingiz, continued the struggle. Benefiting from free Soviet education, he equipped himself with the best education possible and set forth enlightening his fellow Kyrgyz and, indeed, Central Asian kinsmen. For further details on Chingiz Aitmatov's activities, both in literary circles and in the political arena, see, [Aitmatov's Jamila](#) on this site.



Finally, the Kyrgyz are very easily recognized by their national costumes, especially by their hats.

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

For further information, see:

Prior, Daniel. *Bishkek Handbook Inside and Out*, Literary Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, 1994.

E-mail: pfund@pwipg.bishkek.su

Address: 57 Erkindik Prospekt

Bishkek, 720040

Tel./Fax (7-3312) 26-45-34

Lawton, John. *The Turks of Eurasia*, Turkish International Cooperation Agency, 1996.

[Kabul](#) | [Almaty](#) | [Astana](#) | [Baku](#) | [Dushanbe](#) | [Tashkent](#) | [Ashgabat](#)

[Home](#) | [Courses](#)