Adventure Kyrgyzstan Crossing

Between marmots and edelweiss

"Moo" sounds repeatedly, just a few metres away from our tent. It is 7 o'clock in the morning, we are at an altitude of around 3,000 metres, on a plateau in southern Kyrgyzstan. Yesterday morning, ten guests from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, along with two riding guides and a translator, set off on our two-week adventure ride across Kyrgyzstan. From the former trading centre on the Silk Road, Tash Rabat, we rode upwards, accompanied by the whistling of marmots, across green meadows and past striking rocks. After the twentieth "moo", we surrender, slip out of our sleeping bags and take down our tent – much to the delight of the three bulls, who finally lie down contentedly chewing the cud in their usual spot on the steppe. The two-legged intruders are obviously a nuisance to them. After breakfast, the altitude-induced headaches have fortunately disappeared and my body has slowly acclimatised to the air. In high spirits, I climb into the saddle of the small, lively stallion Tiko. The Kyrgyz ride almost exclusively stallions; we only have one gelding with us. This one was too wild as a stallion, and numerous scars still bear witness to former stallion fights. The beautiful grey horse is still very lively even as a gelding, and instead of resigning himself to his fate like the others, he gallops away through the river on this sunny morning despite his shackles. Two other horses join him, bucking with exuberance, and young riding guide Beka has to ride off again to catch the runaways. Meanwhile, the other stallions are already saddled up, standing next to each other or tied together in pairs, ready to go. It's hard to imagine here: a whole herd of 14 stallions in one place – the occasional squeal doesn't faze our riding guides. Only when they overdo it do they receive a warning or get tied up. While riding, we don't have to pay any attention to anything else. Unless a strange herd of horses is passing by, we don't even think about the fact that we are riding stallions. Only two or three of our horses react at all to strange mares and stallions; the others don't seem to be really aware of their masculinity.

In addition to horses, we also encounter large herds of goats, sheep and cattle, especially at the magical Son Kul steppe lake at an altitude of 3,000 metres. Here we also encounter a herd of rustic yaks. These unusual ungulates with their small eyes, drooping heads and shaggy coats, from which their four legs barely protrude, bring to mind the Ice Age and yetis. Son Kul is one of the scenic highlights of our journey. We rest and ride for two days along the quiet blue lake, whose deepest point is just 7 metres. It is nice and warm, so we also enjoy a swim in front of the snow-capped mountains, which are reflected in the clear water. The ride along the north shore is also beautiful, where there are many small bays between the cliffs.

At Son Kul, we stay twice with nomadic families, which gives us a good insight into rural culture. In Kyrgyzstan, however, farmers only live in yurts in the high steppes and on the lush alpine pastures during the summer. They spend the winter in the villages in the valleys. So alpine farming is the norm. For us Europeans, it takes some getting used to the fact that horses are kept as farm animals. The Kyrgyz people love to eat horse meat, as we already learned at the cattle market in Tokmok. They also keep horses for their milk, as mare's milk is used to make the famous national drink kumis. It tastes sour and slightly fermented, and most guests are happy with just a small sip. To obtain mare's milk, the foals are tied up near the yurts during the day in summer and the mares are milked about every two hours. At night, they are allowed to enjoy the great freedom of the steppe with their mothers. That is, if the wolves don't get them, because foals are a favourite prey for wolves. Sheep and goats are herded into a pen at night for safety. Families also usually have one to three dogs that sound the alarm when wolves approach. Calves are treated similarly to foals; they are either tethered at night or kept in a pen during the day so that the cows can be milked. This is a lovely sight for us, as calves are usually separated from their mothers immediately after birth and kept in solitary confinement.

In addition to the many animals, we are particularly impressed by the numerous flowers; I have never seen such carpets of flowers before. The dominant colour of the alpine meadows is purple. In between, yellow alpine poppies and forget-me-nots shine brightly. In the steppe, on the other hand, white dominates: at Son Kul, we find ourselves among thousands of edelweiss! There is also an incredible variety of thistles, which accompany us everywhere in many different forms. It is therefore not advisable to walk barefoot through the meadows, as the small green thistles hidden in the grass are particularly treacherous and occasionally provoke a cry of pain when pitching tents. Most impressive are the huge stemless white thistles at the 3,570 m high Chem Pass, which we cross on the penultimate day. They look so fluffy and soft, but on closer inspection, the needle-like, thick spines under the white fluff are clearly visible. During our ride, we cross several passes over 3,000 metres high, each offering an incredibly beautiful mountain panorama. The paths over the mountains are narrow and rocky in places. A head for heights is a must on this adventurous ride! In two or three places, the only thing that helps is to literally "close your eyes and go for it" when the path is no longer visible and the slope drops vertically into the depths. The horses are absolutely sure-footed and perform incredibly well: whether it's extremely steep uphill or downhill

, over rocks and through rivers, or even galloping briskly across the plains, they give their all. They calmly take large strides over ditches and are not bothered at all by the numerous river crossings; after all, they grew up in this wild terrain and not in a flat paddock with automatic watering troughs. Between the individual mountain ridges lie wide valleys, most of which are very fertile and green.

Kyrgyzstan is blessed with water. The mountain streams provide ample water for the plains. This means there is plenty of hay for the long winter months. In addition, hydroelectric power is generated, some of which is even exported to neighbouring Uzbekistan. Another treasure of the country is its gold reserves. However, 75% of this is reaped by Canada – modern colonial policy. The horses also seem to roll around in gold dust; the coats of these noble-looking animals very often have a golden sheen, as is known from the Akhal-Teke horses, for example. Otherwise, we encounter horses of all colours: from black horses to palominos to roans, everything is represented. The landscape is as diverse as the flora and fauna. In places, the mountains are reminiscent of the Atlas Mountains in Morocco: barren red to ochre-coloured rock faces with scattered green grass bushes border the wide valley. Added to this are the individual magnificent cemeteries with oriental turrets and the small mosques in the villages, whose silver domes stand out from the mud-brick buildings. The villages are all quite similar: ochre-coloured mud buildings in green plains, criss-crossed by water channels. Some of the houses are also painted white, and a bright turquoise is often used for roofs, courtyard gates and fences. Each house is surrounded by a garden, where a horse, calf or donkey often grazes. Almost every farm also has a dog and a few chickens. The cows often go out to pasture together in the morning. At the roadside, we often encounter calves roaming around the village during the day. The people eye us with interest and greet us

back. The children are particularly curious, peeking shyly from behind the farm gates.

Life in what is now a predominantly Muslim country is very traditional, at least in rural areas. While women are responsible for the household and children, men take care of the cattle herds. It's not that women can't ride horses, but the division of roles seems quite rigid. In contrast, our riding guide's sister, Gylmira, is a very confident and independent woman: the divorced mother of several children works in electrical engineering and also runs a small farm in Kalinovka. This is also the base for the rides, where we stay before and after the ride. During the trail, Gylmira accompanies us in the support vehicle. She takes care of the guests' physical well-being and, with her warm nature, is the heart and soul of the group. We feel very much in good hands with the extended family of our riding guide Saty. Saty, who lives in Switzerland and only returns home for the summer trails, enlists the help of his entire family: his sister as a cook, his brother as a driver and his nephew as a second guide and groom. It's a good thing that his brother is also a mechanic, because our historic support vehicle from the Soviet era sometimes struggles in the mountains. Nephew Beka not only leads the spare horses, but also diligently teaches us Kyrgyz, so that by the end we at least have a basic vocabulary ranging from snail to goodbye. We meet other family members and acquaintances in the villages and yurts where we spend the night. One evening, several of Saty's friends come to visit our tent camp. Everyone is happy to see their friend again and the evening turns into a cheerful celebration with Kyrgyz and German songs around the campfire.

After five incredibly beautiful mountain passes, just as many plains, countless rivers, steppes and villages, we reach Kalinovka again on the eleventh day of riding, near the Kazakh border. We have now crossed the country from south to north on horseback. With the snow-capped mountains of China in the background, we now ride towards the barren high cliffs that mark the border with Kazakhstan. A great adventure in a country that is hardly developed for tourism lies behind us. After a farewell party at Gylmira's farm, it is finally time to say goodbye. Saty and our lovely, always cheerful translator Asel accompany us to the capital Bishkek. The city, with a population of around 900,000, is still relatively new, as the Kyrgyz, like the Mongols, were nomads for a long time. It was only under Russian rule that collective farms, which are still used today, as well as villages and a few towns, were gradually built. Contrary to expectations, the capital still has a lot of charm. There are parks, fountains, squares and markets, cafés, and it is also quite clean. At the market and in the department store, we stock up on great souvenirs, from felt cushions to bags and bridles. Rooted between Asia and the Orient, Kyrgyzstan offers a unique adventure, both culturally and scenically. The holiday is over far too quickly, but we will certainly remember the scents, the flowers, the smiling people, the beautiful horses and the high mountains of this dreamlike country for a long time to come!

Jessica Kiefer, July 2015

Link to the programme: www.equitour.com/av-wkgri01.htm