Kyrgyzstan

Location

Kyrgyzstan is a country located in Central Asia. Its geographic coordinates are between 42° and 52° N latitude, and between 36° and 74° E longitude. As the country is landlocked, it has many neighboring countries. Kazakhstan is to the North of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan is located to the West, Tajikistan is to the southwest, and east of Kyrgyzstan borders China. The capital of Kyrgyzstan is Bishkek, which is located in the north central region of the country and close to the country's border with Kazakhstan. The other major cities in Kyrgyzstan are Osh, Cholpon Ata, and Karakol. Kyrgyzstan has one small village, Barak, that is completely encompassed by Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan has four small areas that are completely encompassed by Kyrgyzstan.

Geography

Kyrgyzstan is divided into seven providences: Batken, Chui, Jalal-Abad, Naryn, Osh, Talas, and Issyk-Kul. In total, Kyrgyzstan encompasses 198,500 square kilometers. In comparison, it is slightly smaller than the area of South Dakota. Of Kyrgyzstan’s total area, 7,200 square kilometers are water, as there is one major lake, Ysyk-Koi, and one major river, the Naryn. Approximately 90% of the country’s area is mountainous as part of the Tian Shan mountain range. Lake Issyk-Kul, the world’s second largest mountainous lake, is located in the northwestern Tian Shan. There are also some parts of the country that are desert areas.

Climate
Kyrgyzstan has a wide range of climate differing between its regions. The southwestern part of the country, Fergana Valley, is subtropical, and summer temperatures reach up to 40º C, or 104º F. The northern portion of the country, which encompasses the mountain range’s foothills, is temperate. The climate within the Tian Shan mountain range varies with elevation. The region’s coldest areas will experience sub-zero temperatures for approximately 40 days during the winter season.

History

Kyrgyzstan’s official name is the Kyrgyz Republic. The word “Kyrgyz” is thought to have the original meaning of “forty girls” or “forty tribes.” According to legend, an epic hero named Manas united forty tribes against the Mongols; it is commonly thought that the forty-ray sun on Kyrgyzstan’s flag represents these forty tribes of Manas.

Historical evidence estimates Kyrgyzstan’s history to date back to 201 B.C. as a people group migrating within the areas of present day Mongolia and Siberia. They came to settle in the region of present day Kyrgyzstan during the 15th and 16th centuries. In the early 19th century, their southern region came under Russia’s control and officially became a territory of the Russian empire in 1876. This take over, resulted in political unrest and revolts, and many Kyrgyz migrated to Afghanistan and China. In 1916, there was a formal revolt against the Tsarist Empire, and approximately one sixth of the Kyrgyz population was killed in the process.

The Soviets took control of the region in 1918, and in 1924 the region was established as the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast within the Russian Federal Socialist Republic. On December 5, 1936, the country officially became the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (S.S.R.) as a full Union Republic of the U.S.S.R.
During the early time period of the Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan’s culture and social life developed, and education and literacy were greatly improved; however, the government encouraged the people to take on a stance of atheism, thus detracting the people from their former religious beliefs. Political groups were illegal, but by the late 1980s some groups were allowed to emerge to address issues concerning a housing crisis.

During the early 1990s, many political changes began to take place, and the Kyrgyzstan Democratic Movement had developed and gained a lot of force and support within the nation’s Parliament. Little by little, as young new leaders came to power, the country began to make moves toward independence from the USSR. In December of 1990, the government voted to change the name of the country to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. In March 1991, it was voted to keep ties with the Soviet Union as a “renewed federation,” but as a result of sudden political changes and unrest in Moscow, Kyrgyzstan officially declared its independence from the Soviet Union on August 31, 1991.

On December 21, 1991, Kyrgyzstan joined the new Commonwealth of Independent States. Kyrgyzstan’s independence was completed on December 25, 1991, and in 1992 Kyrgyzstan joined the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Since Kyrgyzstan’s independence, the nation has been filled with political unrest. President Akayev, who was president at the time of Kyrgyzstan’s independence, was forced to resign in April 2005 as a result of the Tulip Revolution. The country still suffers from corruption and numerous assignations as many political units fight to gain power.

**Important Dates**
Important dates in the Kyrgyz calendar are: New Years Day — January 1; New Year Holiday — January 2-6; Orthodox Christmas — January 7; Women’s Day — March 8; People’s Holiday of Nooruz — March 21; National Revolution Day — March 24; Labor Day — May 1; Constitution Day of the Kyrgyz Republic — May 5; Victory Day — May 9; Independence Day of the Kyrgyz Republic — August 31; the season of Ramadan; Social Revolution Day — November 7; and Kurman Ait (the Feast of Sacrifice) — November 27.

Population

According to the July 2008 estimates, Kyrgyzstan’s population at that time was 5,356,869 people. This gave it the rank of 111 among countries. The population growth rate, according to the same statistics, is 1.38%, and the average fertility rate is 2.67 children born per woman. Approximately 30% of its population is between 0 and 14 years, 64% between the ages of 15 and 64, and 6 percent over the age of 65. Life expectancy at birth is 69.12 years, and the median age is 24.2 years. The average population density is 26 people per square kilometer, or 67 people per square mile. Kyrgyzstan is ranked 134th for population density. The country’s population is described as rural, as only an approximate one-third of the population reside within an urban area.

In terms of ethnic groups, approximately 65% are Kyrgyz, 14% are Uzbek, 13% are Russian, and 1% each are Dungan, Ukrainian, and Uygur; other ethnic groups make up the remaining 6%.

Currency

Kyrgyzstan’s currency is the Som. The currency also uses tyiyn, which is one one-hundredth of a som. This currency was introduced on May 10, 1993, thus replacing
the Soviet ruble. 200 Soviet rubles were equal to one som. Coins include 10 and 50 tyiyn coins, as well as one, three, and five som coins. They also use many very colorful paper bills, with a worth ranging from one som to 1000 som. These have different dimensions, with the soms of a higher worth having a larger proportional dimension.

The current (2009) exchange rate between the US dollar and the Kyrgyzstan som is 1 dollar to 41.8 som.

Education

According to the 1999 census, Kyrgyzstan was reported to have a 98.7% literacy rate. Schooling is mandatory from age 6 through 15. These nine years of school are broken up into four years of primary school, for ages 6 through 10, and five years of secondary school. Upon completion of secondary school, students can choose to continue their education for an addition four years at a specialized secondary school or a technical and vocational school. Any education beyond age 18 is completed at the university level. There are currently 14 colleges and universities in Kyrgyzstan.

Language

The official languages in Kyrgyzstan are Kyrgyz and Russian. Other languages that are spoken in Kyrgyzstan are Uzbek and Dungun, with all of the languages being spoken in proportion to the ethnic makeup of the country. The Kyrgyz language belongs to the Southern Turkic group of languages. In 1924, an Arabic-based Kyrgyz alphabet was created; however, a Latin script replaced this in 1928, and in 1941 a Cyrillic alphabet was adopted.
Out of five former Soviet republics in central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is only one of two that have kept the Russian language as an official language. In an attempt to avoid a brain drain, Russian was kept as an official language after independence primarily as a message to ethnic Russians that they were welcome and encouraged to stay in the country. Russian is understood and spoken all over the country. It is often considered a language of business in the country, and a mother tongue for many people living in the capital city of Bishkek.

Religion

Islam became the most widely practiced religion in the region during the 12th century. The majority of Kyrgyz are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. However, Islam has become more a piece of Kyrgyz culture instead of a devout faith practice. During the Soviet era, state atheism was encouraged, but today there seems to be movement towards a restoration of the traditional religious practices and is being encouraged by the government. Today, approximately 75% of the Kyrgyz population claim to be Muslim, an addition 20% claims to be Russian Orthodox, and the remaining 5% claim other religious beliefs.

Agriculture

Agriculture is a major and important component of Kyrgyzstan’s economy. Their agricultural products include tobacco, cotton, wheat, potatoes, vegetables, grapes, fruits and berries, wool, dairy products, and meat from sheep, goats, and cattle. However, only tobacco and cotton are exported in large quantities. Raising livestock accounts for the majority of Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector, as it does well in the nation’s mostly
mountainous terrain. In 2002, agriculture accounted for 35.6% of Kyrgyzstan’s GDP and approximately 50% of the nation’s employment.

Kyrgyzstan is also very rich in mineral resources, specifically coal, gold, uranium, antimony, and rare-earth metals. These industries also account for an important sector of Kyrgyzstan’s economy, and the government hopes to attract lots foreign investment in this field.

**Trade**

By the end of the Soviet era, approximately 98% of Kyrgyz trading existed within the Soviet Union. Therefore, at the time of independence, Kyrgyzstan’s economy suffered greatly with a huge decrease in markets as a result of the Soviet trading bloc being removed. Great improvement has been made in securing trade relationships, but difficulty still remains within the economy.

Kyrgyzstan exports to the countries of Russia, Switzerland, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and China. As stated earlier, agriculture and mineral resources make up a considerable percentage of Kyrgyzstan’s economy and trade relationships. Kyrgyzstan’s largest exports are nonferrous metals and minerals, woolen goods, tobacco, cotton, electric energy from their hydroelectric power plants, and some engineering products. There are many things that the country has to import, such as petroleum and natural gas, ferrous metals, chemicals, machinery, wood and construction materials, paper products, and some types of food. The countries Kyrgyzstan imports from are Russia, China, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

**Food**
Beshbarmak is the most common Kyrgyz dish. It is a mixture of noodles and boiled meat cut into thinly sliced pieces, and then served with a mildly spicy sauce and bouillon. This dish is eaten with your hands. Another dish is called chuchpara, a dish of minced meat and dumplings served with onions, spices, and a broth. This dish is served in a bowl and eaten with a spoon. Jarkop is stewed meat served with onions, radishes, and noodles, and it is served on boiled pieces of dough. Blini is a Russian dish made from pancakes that have been rolled and then filled with meat, a type of cottage cheese, or jam. There are many more dishes of various combinations of cooked meat, noodles, and vegetables.

**Landmarks**

Kyrgyzstan has two distinct mountains: Pik Pobedy, which stands at 7439 meters, and Pik Dankova, which stands at 5,982 meters. The main sources of attraction for visitors to Kyrgyzstan surround the many opportunities for camping and trekking through the country’s mountainous topography. Skiing is also a major attraction, especially in the Karakol Valley National Park.

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