

But is it.....is KYRGYZSTAN a big DO or DON'T?

By Kirsten Koza

Photographs: Sergey Gluhoverov

When everybody says "don't go to Kyrgyzstan" and the only person who says "do" is an author who accidentally peed on Idi Amin and goes by the name "A Rotten Person" - one should probably listen to the "don'ts". But I'm not. I'm biking across Kyrgyzstan next month with a local guide.



A tough time for guides in Kyrgyzstan. These Kyrgyz heroes of tourism take a trip together to work on improving services and their country's reputation in the eyes of future travellers. As chaos erupted in the cities, they found the Nomads, far removed, were unaware of the strife that will now affect their livelihoods, as the numbers of tourists dwindle due to fear, travel advisories and recent media coverage.

To be honest, I'm more worried about insulting the nomadic people than I am with the political situation. My guide has provided me with two pages of cultural DOs and DON'Ts, regarding staying with nomads, including toilet etiquette. There's nothing about protocol when it comes to urinating on dictators in the two pages, but you must enter the toilet with the left foot first.

I'm bound to find out the consequences of using the right, when I stumble into the yurt-loo on a run, after washing down sheep eyes and tail fat with fermented mare's milk. Sergey, my guide, has said it is highly offensive to say "no thanks" when offered any of these Kyrgyz treats.

Before you too say, "Kirsten, don't go." This is cultural immersion to the power of a gazillion. I'm already in shock and these are the very reasons I am going. However, I couldn't imagine doing a trip through these superstitious mine fields without a local guide reminding me to never touch another person's hat or scrunch up my own. I've found the guide to the guides for this trip. Sergey (with the support of the Kyrgyz ministry of education and science) offers bi-monthly free seminars during the off season to guides, providing guest speakers including famous archaeologists, historians and scientists to educate guides and individuals in tourism.

Tourism is suffering in Kyrgyzstan because of the political turmoil that started in April. The Lonely Planet has toned back their high risk travel alert but many governments around the world take a much more conservative approach and recommend that their citizens not travel anywhere in Kyrgyzstan regardless of the violence being specific to certain areas. I'm Canadian, and my government says "Don't".

Even Tatyana Parfenyuk of Kazakhstan's Consular visa services in Toronto said I should get a transit visa for Kazakhstan, just in case my connecting flight to Kyrgyzstan is cancelled. By the way, when talking to someone from Kazakhstan, DON'T ever make reference to Borat.

Is Kyrgyzstan a big DO or DON'T? I don't know. But it's a GO, and I'll let you know if "Rotten" is right or wrong when I return.

To read all the DOs and DON'Ts of Kyrgyzstan and to see Kirsten's itinerary, visit the SCOOP & SCANDAL page of her website: www.kirstenkoza.com



Local Guide Pride



Sergey points out a spectacular bike route - but is this the uphill or downhill?



Sergey has provided Kirsten with two pages of cultural DOs and DON'Ts so she doesn't offend the nomadic people she will be staying with.

Travel DOS AND DON'TS...

"On the south coast of Crete, guns will be fired regularly into the night sky whether you like it or not. Right by your head. It's best to get used to it, and accept it for the celebratory and welcoming gesture it is."

Kimmy Beach, Canadian poet

