

Kyrgyzstan: In the footsteps of Ella Maillart to the source of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya)

Tonight we are going to Kyrgyzstan. It's already 10 years since I was there. I expect it has already changed. I had a subvention – a grant – from the ville de Geneve to explore the sources of the Syr Darya that's the river that used to be called the Jaxartes, and to visit the summer herders. Ella Maillart was in Kyrgyzstan in 1932 and I will show some of Ella's photos. I'd like to thank the Musee d'Elysee in Lausanne for their permission to show these photos.

I'll just start with a few maps

****Here's Kyrgyzstan.** It has a long frontier with China and is surrounded by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. All these frontiers were created by the Soviets in the 1920s. Before that all this part of Central Asia was called Turkmenistan. All these soviet states became independent republics when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991 – 17 years ago already.

The Caspian Sea is to the west and the **Aral Sea**.

To the south are Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

The majority of the people in all this region are Muslim.

****Kyrgyzstan** is a mountain paradise – about half the country is over 3000 m. The highest peak is almost 7500m. It is a cool green island sandwiched between the steppes of Kazakhstan to the north and the burning Taklamakan Desert in China to the south

Kyrgyzstan is truly in the heart of Central Asia.

The continental water divide is along the ridge of Tien Shan and the Pamir mountains. Not one of the rivers that flows from these mountains reaches the sea.. They are all lost in the deserts on either side.

The two great rivers of Central Asia are the the Oxus and the Jaxartes to give them their Greek names – or the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya as they are now called.

The Amu Darya or Oxus rises in the Pamir mountains in Afghanistan. The **Syr Darya** or Jaxartes rises in the Tien Shan mountains, the Celestial Mountains, in Kyrgyzstan. Both rivers flow into the Aral Sea. But originally they probably both flowed into the Caspian Sea.

****On this old map by Ptolomy** from the 2nd century AD, The Oxus and Jaxartes flow into the Caspian Sea. The Greeks, The Persians and the Arabs, in their mythology saw these as two of their rivers of Paradise. They all believed this area to be a sort of Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve lived. From where we all originated.

And, if like me, you have always wondered where the Arians came from – where our ancestors came from – Here is Aria. Sogdiana and Sythia above. (based on map by Heroditus – 450 BC)

The Aral Sea was not mentioned by the Greeks, the Romans or the Persians. The Aral sea was first mentioned in the 7th century AD, when the Arab maps showed the Oxus and Jaxartes flowing into it.

Earthquakes probably moved the rivers around

The Aral Sea is now drying up because almost all the water from both rivers is used for irrigation – but that's another whole talk in itself.

Perhaps you are wondering why I wanted to explore the Jaxartes (the Syr Darya). Simply because so much has been written about the Oxus and almost nothing about the Jaxartes. The Jaxartes is longer than the Oxus – almost 3000 km long.

**** the last map**

Kyrgyzstan is about 5 times bigger than Switzerland with only 5 million inhabitants. It's a Muslim country, but about 20 % of the population are of Russian origin. There are also quite a few Germans there – Menonites who emigrated there 2 centuries ago.

Here is our river – the Syr Darya. The sources of the 3 main tributaries are here, south of Lake Issyk Kol. Lake Issyk Kol is much bigger than Lac Lemman – it's about 170 km long and 70 km wide – more than 500km round the shore.

From Bishkek the capital of Kyrgyzstan, we drove round lake Issyk Kol and we went up to 4000 m in these mountains to visit these three sources here.

We also visited a 4th source here in **Lake Songkol** to study the summer herders. – les Bergers d'ete.

Then we went south and visited these two sources of this other big tributary here.

** **Bishkek** the capital of Kyrgyzstan. A modern town 2ce the size of Geneva – and 2ce as high – at 800m. This building with the satellite dishes is the main **post office** and what the Kyrgyz call **Big Ben**. This sign reads **S_T_O_P**

** **Lenin** 100 years ago Lenin was in Geneva. There were statues of Lenin all over Kyrgyzstan 10 years ago. Here he is pointing towards the mountains that are about 5000 m high – like Mt Blanc.

** **Et les filles** They fill your car at the petrol station. But most Kyrgyz women are dressed like this one.

****Ella Maillart was in Bishkek**, then called Frunze, in 1932 She came from Moscow on the train, 6 years after the arrival of communism. Camel carts, horses, unpaved roads, one lorry.

** **Ella in 1932** aged 29. She was in Moscow to study Russian cinema. Her 1st book was **Parmi la jeunesse russe**. Her book on this trip was **Des Monts Celeste aux Sables Rouges** or **Turkestan Solo** in English. Her next trip in 1934 was across China with Peter Flemming on which he wrote **News from Tartary** and she wrote **Oasis Interdite – The Forbidden Journey**. She was an adventurer – very independent. Travelled and lived by her writing.

****Ella was born in Geneva in 1903**. She was a great adventurer and very independent. She was on the Swiss ski team. She sailed for Switzerland in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. She founded the Suisse Romande ladies hockey team. She was very athletic. She cherished her independence. She didn't want to marry. A very strong and original character.

** **4 bazaar scenes**. We did not take any food with us – we bought all we needed in the bazaar. This is my friend Sue – we have often travelled together in Pakistan.

** The market stays open in the evening – this is about 8.00pm – 20 heures. You can see from the warm clothes that it is cool in July at 800 m.

****You recognise the brand** names – les marques – Ariel, Cif, savon de Marseille, Tide, all written in Roman script.

****Bread** is the staple diet in Kyrgyzstan. They use leavened and unleavened bread – pain a levure ainsi que les galettes.

****Ella's excellent photo** of a traditional bread oven – as you still find all over Central Asia – Pakistan, India, Western China. The bread is stuck to the inside to cook and is pulled out with this hook.

****This is our team** – Adrian, a London Surgeon. Hugh, a retired British diplomat and Sue. Viktor our driver – of Russian origin like 20 % of the people in Kyrgyzstan. And Semetei, our Kyrgyz interpreter – 20 years old and a student at the American university in Bishkek.

Behind us Lake Issyk Kol and the Tien Shan mountains – les monts Celestes between 5000 and 6000 m high – almost always in the clouds. This is our Russian jeep, a Waz, owned by Viktor. It was quite comfortable and served us well. We drove 3,600 km all over Kyrgyzstan.

****Ella Maillart arrived here by truck** – that was always breaking down. She travelled with two Russian couples from Moscow – a doctor and a biologist and their two wives. She tells us very little about them. She only met them the day before they left and joined them because they had the necessary permits.

**** Ella and her companions** crossed the lake in a steam boat. We didn't see any of the old big boats – only fishing boats tourist pedalos.

**** Lake Issyk-Kol** is at 1000 metres, but the water is warm. It never freezes. The Soviets developed it as a resort area with hotels all around the edge. The lake resorts were at their height in the 1980s but by 1998 they were very run down, though still popular - The hotels were monstrous blocks built by Soviet trade unions and factories. The lake has no outlet and is slightly salty.

****For thousands of years** people have lived by Lake Issyk-Kol. There are rock engravings like these all around the lake, some of which date back to 500 BC. Ibex, leopard and wolf. The lake behind.

**** All over Kyrgyzstan** are impressive graveyards with big decorated tombs with antlers, some with ibex or Marco Polo sheep horns

****This one with, a snow leopard and horse.** The Kyrgyz are nomads. They have a saying that they wander all their life, and live in yurts, and it is only in death that they settle and live in a house.

**** But the Soviets** built villages for the Kyrgyz. All over the country the villages are exactly the same. A square house with an iron roof, with a front garden and blue fence with white diamond decoration set exactly the same distance back from the road.

Ella in 19332 describes the new houses, with the Kyrgyz living in their yurts beside the house and using the house to stable their animals.

Ella also wrote “Le Régime des soviets plonge brusquement les nomade dans le XXe siècle, leur apportant collectivization, socialisme, sédentarisation, écoles, hôpitaux, journaux, radio, tracteurs, cinemas.”

****At the eastern end** of the lake is the old Soviet port of Kara-Kol. The Soviet submarine base and torpedo research centre. The Soviets tested their submarines in the lake which is 700 metres deep. More than twice as deep as Lac Léman (309m)

****Ella also took a photo** here – in 1932 there were big sailing boats on the lake.

****Beside the old port** stands this monument to **Nikolai Prejevalski**, the legendary Russian explorer who died here of typhoid in 1888. Ella saw the monument in 1932 when the trees were still small.

****The monument and tomb** are still there, the trees are now big.

****Beside the monument** is the Nikolai Prejevalski Museum full of maps of his expeditions. 10 years ago the directrice was a Russian woman, very enthusiastic. She shows us Prejevalski’s horse – discovered by Prejevalski in western China.

**** Kara-Kol was founded** as a Russian military post in the 19th century. We visited the church – which was turned into a gymnastic club by the Soviets, but is now a

****consecrated church** again. – interior

**** and the icon** of the Virgin is now venerated again here.

**** The Kara-Kol mosque is also** open again since independence in 1991. The mosque looks like a Buddhist shrine. It was designed by Chinese Buddhist at the beginning of the 20th century for the Chinese muslim community at Kara-Kol.

****At Karakol we visited the market** to stock up on provisions again – dried fruit, apricots, walnuts and

****eggs.** The women wear hats like women in European supermarkets

**** Ella Maillart also** visited the market in Kara-Kol where she bought horses. See the boots and bare feet

****Ella also saw skis.** A samovar – in 1932 almost all the men wore Soviet caps

**** no one wears** caps any more They wear **ak-kalpak** - traditional hats and European clothes.

**** In 1932 a few** old people wore the Kyrgyz hat with traditional hand woven clothes and sheep skin coats.

****Ella's map of her journey in Kyrgyzstan 1932.** She took the train from Moscow to Frunze (now Bishkek) The the truck to the lake. She crossed the lake by steam boat. At Kara-Kol she bought horses and rode across the Monts Celèste to the Chinese frontier. She returned on horseback to Almati – the capital of Kazakstan – where she took the train to Uzbekistan. Her journey took 6 monts – our journey took 5 weeks.

****We followed Ella's route up into the mountains** – by jeep on a new road built by the Kumtor gold mine – run by the Canadians

**** just over the 4000m pass** the glaciers flow down from 4500m – one of the sources of the Syr Darya

**** nearby at 3,600m,** is a station meteo - a weather station, built in 1927.

****Ella was also there** The meteo station was built to survey the glaciers at the source of the Syr Darya. This river is so important for all of Central Asia that they need to keep a watch on its sources. This is the highest weather station in the ex-Soviet Union.

****Ella Maillart** found some skis in the meteo station. The skis did not have any fixations – any bindings. So she tied them on her feet with wire and she climbed completely alone to the summit of this 5000 m mountain and skied back down. All in 7 hours. She was terribly independent, determined and courageous.

****Today (well 10 years ago when I was there)** the meteorologist checked his instruments every 3 hours and

****sent the results to Bishkek and to Moscow** every 3 hours too.

**** This is the** dormitory in the meteo station where Ella slept. There was a team of Swiss ecologists here one month before us – studying snow leopards. The temperature in winter goes down to -40 C. The walls are 1.4m thick. (un metre quarante)

****Behind the** meteo station is the source of the Syr Darya. But we were not allowed to go there because this is the Canadian gold mine, Kumtor, one of the 10 largest in the world. The mine is here beside the glacier. Gold was found in these mountains by the Soviets in the 1970s, but it was only exploited after independence. The Canadians arrived in 1993 and started producing in 1996. There are serious questions of pollution – cyanide, mercury, arsenic, cadmium are used in the process.

****The two meteorologists** fish in the river.

****All these fish** caught in half an hour in the river that comes from the mine – he didn't seem worried about poisoned water. Ella Maillart also tried to fish here using a cleft stick – without success..

The meteorologist was worried that the blasting at the mine had cracked the walls of the house. The Canadians had leased the whole valley, were refusing to pay for repairs and were trying to close the meteo station.

****Still at 3,500m** we go up to the source of a 3rd tributary of the Syr Darya, 50 km from the Chinese frontier.

****This is the environmental officer** – le garde de faune. – from the Frontier Camp. He tried to turn us back – he said the whole area was closed because the marmots here carry the bubonic plague – la peste. I had read in Tim Severin's book on Mongolia that the marmots carried the bubonic plague, so I was not surprised. Our doctor, Adrian, assured him that we were all inoculated against bubonic plague so he let us go on. Semetei, our interpreter and Victor our driver wanted to turn back, but we managed to convince them that we had the necessary antibiotics with us to cure the plague.

****We had base camp here** – still at about 3,500m – Sue and Adrian are cooking. It is bitterly cold with torrential storms every day and deserted. 16,000 sheep were collectively farmed here in Soviet times. The area is grazed out and there are no sheep here now and no inhabitants except for the Frontier Post. Kyrgyzstan used to raise 13 million sheep in Soviet times and export wool. 10 years ago there were about 4 million sheep as the pastures are bare from overgrazing.

****It was near here that Ella took** one of her most famous photos. A Kyrgyz with a hunting eagle. She met three horsemen with their eagles – she said they were enormous.

****The man's hand is supported** on a wooden rest. This is what Ella writes about hunting a marmot

“Une marmotte est repérée, cernée; l’oiseau libéré de sa lanrière est lancé. Il ne vole pas très haut, fond vers la marmotte, lui coupe la retraite en se mettant devant le terrier. Elle entend du bruit, veut entrer chez elle et tombe dans les serres fatales”. Ella said a trained eagle was worth several horses.

****This is Ella's camp** Just to contrast our modern lightweight tents with the canvas tents and woolen bedding of 1932. They only had one baggage pony – all the rest they carried with them on their riding horses.

****From our camp we hiked up** to the top of the valley to where the stream emerges from the glacier. This is a major source of the Syr Darya. The pass here is the continental water divide – le partage des eaux. The water on the other side flows east into China.

That's enough about rivers for the time being. Here are some plants

****4 slides**, ?, lilly, pea

Now some herders

****At Lake Songkol** at 3000m where the herders come for the 5 summer months. The 7 winter months are spent at home in their village. One family comes up with all the animals of the village – horses cows and sheep.

****Ella also camped** with some herders

****Mairam milks the mares.** The mares' milk is fermented – *koumis* –

slightly alcoholic. Mairam milks 7 mares 5 times a day. In order to get the mare to release her milk the foal has to suck for an instant. Then the front leg is attached, she kneels with the bucket on the other knee, and milks – it all takes about 90 seconds for each mare.

****Mairam milks the cows 2ce a day**

****She separates the cream** from the milk. I grew up on a farm in Ireland. We had no electricity and we had exactly the same machine as this, to separate the milk. Mairam has 4 children. The oldest stays in the village in summer with her grandmother to go to school, 3 young boys come up here to the pastures.

Mairam had 10 years of school – from 7 to 17 – she wanted to go to college but then she was ‘stolen’ or kidnapped. The Kyrgyz have a strange marriage custom. The man kidnaps the girl he wants to marry. Sometimes he plans it ahead with the girl, but sometimes she was taken against her will, perhaps by a man she did not like. She could protest but would lose face by doing so, and perhaps not be chosen by another man – so usually she had to comply and marry the man. Now a woman stolen by a man she does not like can take him to court, so the practice is dying out. Divorce was unheard of 10 years ago – no man would marry a divorced woman. Suicide statistics ?? China – marital problems.

****Mairam’s husband Kurmanbek** doesn’t do anything to help her – he poses with his sons for a photo. Inside of yurt – comfortable – baby 1 year old. Attached to his cot – tied in to stop him moving. Because a wooden pipe leads from his penis to this pot under the cot. I have the pot and pipe here. Different model for girls. Mairam implied that she was not happy with her husband and asked us about divorce.

****Kurmanbek poses** with his sons on a felt carpet. Rain approaches.

****Ella’s photo** – look at the clothes. Bare feet – it’s cold. Hand woven woollen clothes.

****Today’s children in good** health and well dressed at 3000m beside lake