

## MOSAICS, MONUMENTS & MEMORY

From Bishkek's wedding palaces to lakeside sanatoriums, a journey across Kyrgyzstan reveals how the relics of a vanished regime still shape everyday life. Photographs and text by Kunal Bhatia and Shuvajit Payne.



From left: Straddling the old and the new, the imposing Soviet-era State History Museum forms the backdrop to the Changing of the Guards ceremony at the National Flagpole in Bishkek; inside Bishkek's Wedding Palace, vibrant stained glass panels flood the space with rich colour and light, their exuberant designs carefully crafted yet entirely devoid of religious symbols, reflecting the secular nature of Soviet-era ceremonies.



Clockwise from left: A ring of 13 high-relief sculptures encircles the soaring marble-clad pylons of the People's Friendship Monument in central Bishkek, symbolising the unity and camaraderie between diverse ethnic groups—an ideal fervently promoted by the Soviet Union; not all Soviet-era buildings dominate the skyline. This now-abandoned, quirky little structure known as the "Snail," named for its distinctive spiral shape, was once a souvenir store that opened in Bishkek in 1971, offering a glimpse into everyday life during that era; part propaganda, part public art, expansive and colourful mosaics were commissioned throughout the Kyrgyz SSR. This particular mosaic, located in the village of Rot-Front, depicts a serene and contented life, featuring trotting ladies and fluttering birds, reflecting the idealised harmony of the Soviet vision.





*From above:*  
Favoured by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia for thousands of years, these portable round tents, or yurts, remain an intrinsic part of Kyrgyz culture—surviving even through Soviet times. Kyrgyzstan's flag features a stylised yurt roof at its centre; their colourful, carpet-laden interiors offer a warm and welcoming retreat for travellers exploring the countryside.

*Opposite page, from top:* Along the road connecting Bishkek to Lake Issyk Kul stands this unusual bus stop, shaped like a kalpak—the traditional felt hat worn by Kyrgyz men; this bas-relief sculpture, dedicated to cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, is carved directly onto a large boulder beside a gurgling stream in the scenic Barskoon Gorge.





*Clockwise from left:* Archery, rooted in the hunting traditions of nomadic tribes, remains a cherished practice in Kyrgyzstan and is a key competition at the World Nomad Games—the next edition of which Kyrgyzstan will host in 2026; shaped like a ship, the Aurora Sanatorium was built in 1979 on the northern shore of Issyk Kul, originally reserved for the elite members of the community party; Russkoye Kafe, located in the town of Tokmok, is a classic Russian-style cafeteria run by two affable ladies who keep the kitchen bustling with traditional flavours; with a knowledgeable guide like Aibek, we discovered hidden mosaics such as this one in the village of Saylyk—a striking depiction of a Kyrgyz woman in traditional attire, discreetly painted on the back wall of an unassuming grocery store.



“EVERYONE HAS TO get married here.” quips our guide Aibek Adigineev. We’re in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, standing in front of a quintessentially USSR relic—the Wedding Palace. It’s a hulking, modernist structure from the 1980s, with abundant marble and stained glass for illusions of grandeur. With religious expression frowned upon, the communist state created a secular version of a mosque or church to host weddings. Although elaborately decorated, no theological iconography is present. Instead, we’re surprised to spot the hammer-and-sickle motif in the ceremonial hall.

Despite independence since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, many young couples still marry here. Perhaps it’s a sign of an enduring legacy, a love-hate relationship with the past, or only a matter of time before their parents’ and grandparents’ ways fade. In either case, Aibek notes that, unlike other post-Soviet nations, Kyrgyzstan hasn’t begun a sweeping de-Sovietisation process just yet.

Bishkek is full of reminders from that not-so-distant Soviet era—grand monuments, unusual sculptures, and period art. Ala-Too Square in the city centre is flanked by two 1980s-era buildings—the State History Museum on one side and the ‘White House’ (or National Parliament) on the other. At the square, we catch the Changing of the Guards beneath a soaring Kyrgyz flag, then pause at the People’s Friendship Monument, erected in 1974 to mark one hundred years of friendship between Russia and Kyrgyzstan.

Stopping us in our tracks are colourful mosaics sprinkled throughout the city, adorning walls of civic buildings, educational institutes, and otherwise dreary apartment blocks. A powerful tool to spread ideology in the socialist union, the mosaics depict rather utopian scenes—be it gender equality, farmers toiling the land fruitfully, scientists achieving technological progress, or a cross-section of people living in harmony and abundance. In fact, as local expert Ramil Samatkulov reveals, these mosaics and other remnants are to be found across the country, prompting us to join him on a Soviet legacy tour of sorts.

We aim to circle Lake Issyk over several days, halting at villages and yurt camps along the way. The Kyrgyz countryside is exceedingly scenic but we are in search of man-made curiosities instead of natural splendours. In the village of Rot-Front, we stumble upon an abandoned ‘House of Culture’—equivalent to our gymkhanas. Once a thriving social space, and similar to tens of thousands of others within the Soviet Union, we bravely walk through its now crumbling walls to find bas-relief panels, painted murals on the verge of peeling off, and some oddly cheerful mosaics.

Sanatoriums were another cornerstone of life in the USSR and a handful of them dotting Issyk Kul’s shores are still functional today. Part hospital and part spa, weeks-long visits were often state-mandated to have citizens rest and recuperate. Health and sport are the evident themes of the mosaics at Tamga Sanatorium, with many depicting human bodies in all their kinetic glory. Soviet cosmonauts recovered here after their flights, and the surrounding mountains hide a startling sculpture commemorating Yuri Gagarin, the first man to venture into space.

Just when we assume we’ve seen it all, we notice intermittent little structures by the roadside. Some are in bold geometric forms, others take the shape of everyday symbols like birds, yurts, and even the Kyrgyz hat. Ramil discloses that these are local bus stops from Soviet times—leaving us amused at the very thought. ☺

