

Bishkek, I Love You!

Having finished my work at the film festival in Bishkek, I was in no hurry to return home, and decided to take my summer vacation. Before the sky was even light, a car stopped in front of my hotel to pick me up. Aliia, who had attended the film festival, was in the passenger seat waving at me. Driving the car was Aliia's partner, Eldar, the young director of the comedy, *Bishkek, I Love You*.

Aliia's parents live in Osh, the second largest city in the country. It is only half an hour away by plane, but the half-day journey over the mountain roads is full of spectacular scenery, and so I accepted her invitation to join her for the trip. After several days of being immersed in movies from morning to night, I wanted to take a break from films and get in touch with the rich nature of this country. The southern part of the country is lined with spectacular mountains. I also planned to visit the small town of Jalal-Abad, a former mining town just before Osh, and then I would catch up with Aliia.

Eldar drove us to a bus terminal on the outskirts of town. Here we boarded a minibus, small enough to make tight turns. The other passengers were all heading for Osh. Eldar, who still had some work to do in Bishkek, waved us off in the dark. When dawn came, we were already on the mountain roads, and the scenery was breathtaking. The beautiful roads are well known among cyclist backpackers. We passed several foreign cyclists with tents packed on their bicycles.

Every couple of hours, the bus would stop for a toilet break, and it was nice to get out of the stifling car for some fresh air and to stretch our legs. The restrooms were at best just holes separated by plywood, and the men all disappeared into the grass to do their business quickly. A short time after our second meal break, the car arrived at the outskirts of Jalal-Abad. After eight hours of driving, I got off the bus.

Jalal-Abad's population is just a little over 100,000, but it is the third largest city in the country. Apart from the ruins of a once flourishing mineral spring, there is nothing to see, really, but it is good to feel the enthusiasm of the local people. I started to explore the city right away.

Through a gap in the hustle and bustle, a large white *yurt* caught my eye – a type of mobile home seen all around Eurasia. In front of the *yurt*, several tables were lined up, and at one of them an old man in a traditional *kalpak* hat was sipping tea. It seemed to be a restaurant. Our eyes met, and the old man greeted me with “As-salamu alaykum,” and I responded in kind, “Wa’alaykum assalam.” The old man, his face deeply wrinkled, invited me in.

The *yurt* was quite spacious inside, and the owner came out and said she could serve us *ragman* right away, but that *shashlik* would take some time. I decided to enjoy the noodle dish first while waiting for the *shashlik*. I had thought the old man out front might be related to the owner, but he was apparently just another guest. We are all guests in someone's life. I felt an inexpressible sense of comfort in this restaurant, something I often feel when I travel.

Besides myself, there were only a few older men and women hosting a small party. I took a seat a bit apart from them. Shortly after sitting, tea and *ragman* noodles were brought to me by the owner's children, of elementary school age. I am not particularly sociable, but for some reason I have always had a soft spot for children. Since foreign guests were rare, the children hung around after serving me, showing me their school textbooks and toys. That was fun.

Soon after, Aida, the eldest daughter, brought the *shashlik*. The 21-year-old sat a short distance away, watching as I tucked into the charbroiled lamb. The reunion group was getting into the swing of things and started dancing to the music playing in the restaurant. The owner brought a fresh cup of tea, and we had time to talk. She told me that her husband had gone to Siberia to work and that she had six children helping her run the store. When I told her my age, she asked why I wasn't married. I am often asked this when I am in this country.

When I finished eating, the owner asked me to dance with Aida. I never refuse such an invitation in a foreign country. I joined Aida, and imitated the slow movements of the old people's group. I probably looked clumsy, but the restaurant owner just smiled at us. After a round of dancing, we sat down around the table again. The owner smiled and asked me – right in front of her daughter, “Will

you marry Aida? She can do housework and is a good cook.”

I try to imagine myself leaving my job in Japan and living here. It would be a stress-free life, never pressed for time. By the time I died, I would write a memoir about my life, and it might sell a few copies back home, as a story of an unusual Japanese person, but would eventually be forgotten. That life doesn't seem so bad. I am tempted.

But there was one problem. There were no movie theaters in Jalal-Abad. For me, life without movies is unthinkable. I heard that there were several small movie theaters in Osh. So, in the end, I decide to get up early tomorrow, visit the mineral spring, and then go to Osh to watch a movie with Aliia. It would be fun to surprise her by saying, “I'm getting married.” I can just imagine her shocked face. But, I think I'll just go watch a movie instead.

Teacher's Note: This text includes many questions that cannot necessarily be inferred from the text, so students will be required to do a little research. Each question should be used as a discussion point to encourage further learning outside of class.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. What country was the narrator visiting?

Answer: Kyrgyzstan.

Hints/Clues: The most obvious clues are the city names – a cursory search based on Bishkek or Osh will reveal the answer. Students should be encouraged to search for the answer likely not many will be familiar with central Asia. A possible hurdle is the city of Jalal-Abad, very similar in name to Jalalabad in Afghanistan (and *katakana* representations of the two cities are also very similar: ジャララバード and ジャラーラーバード, respectively).

2. What is the official language, and what is the state language? Why do you think these are different?

Answer: Russian (公用語) and Kyrgyz (国語・国家後), respectively.

Hints/Clues: There are no specific clues in the text – answers should be based on researching the question (both English and Japanese Wikipedia pages offer insight). Also, it provides an interesting discussion point about the official status of languages in societies, and why certain languages are afforded different statuses.

3. Like many central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991. Many countries stopped using Russian as an official language, but Kyrgyzstan did not. Why do you think this is?

Answer: Answers will vary – credit should be given for well-reasoned answers.

Hints/Clues: Students should be encouraged to imagine reasons for before trying to research the answer. The information on the English and Japanese Wikipedia pages differs. The English information states that “many business and political affairs are carried out in Russian. Until recently, Kyrgyz remained a language spoken at home and was rarely used during meetings or other events,” – given its key role in these areas, this would seem sufficient reason to maintain the language in an official capacity. The Japanese Wikipedia page is more explicit, suggesting that maintaining Russian as an official language was “intended to prevent the exodus (brain drain) of Russians and other Russian-speaking residents who had occupied the country's core, and is now widely used in education, business, and government.”

4. The old man greeted the narrator with ‘As-salamu alaykum.’ This is an Arabic greeting, a language not widely spoken in Kyrgyzstan – so why do you think the old man used it?

Answer: Because Islam is widely practiced in the country.

Hints/Clues: The Arabic greeting, which means ‘peace be upon you,’ has become a religious greeting for Muslims worldwide, even amongst the non-Arabic speaking Muslim population.

5. **The narrator mentions that the restaurant he visited was in a Yurt, which he describes as ‘a type of mobile home seen all around Eurasia.’ Cast your minds back to previous lessons – can you remember what another name for ‘yurt’ might be?**

Answer: Ger.

Hints/Clues: In question 2 of 4.6 *Mothers in Mongolia*, the family is described as possibly living in a ger. Students’ memories can be jogged by using images of yurts – for this question, they should only be encouraged to look up the answer if they have completely forgotten the name.

6. **Why do you think the restaurant owner was so ready to have her daughter marry the narrator?**

Answer: Answers will vary – credit should be given for well-reasoned or imaginative answers.

Hints/Clues: No specific hints, except for the fact that the narrator, after mentioning his age, is asked why he isn’t married, and that he is ‘often asked this when [he is] in this country,’ suggesting that it is common to get married at a younger age. Other potential options include the fact that he is from Japan means he may well have been seen as a financially stable partner. Potential discussion points may also include different cultural approaches to marriage – that vary not just across national cultures, but also across time – such as marriage for love, for stability, for political reasons, etc.