After receiving the FLAS for Summer 2015, I found myself in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan studying in an intensive Russian language program at The London School. Having entered with little expectations and little knowledge of the country, I have to admit, I encountered some surprises. I used my first squat toilet. I rode my first marshrutka. I consumed an absurd amount of lagman and manti. I frequented the bazaars. I drank my beer with a straw.

My favorite part of being abroad this summer was taking trips around the country, and for the last-minute travel planner, Kyrgyzstan is a paradise. It is almost impossible to buy bus tickets in advance and there is no departure schedule. Instead, you must go to the bus station, find a marshrutka traveling in the right direction and claim a seat. The marshrutka leaves only when it is full – which could range from 20 minutes to 2 hours (though the drivers will always assure you it will only take 20 more minutes). However, the wait was always worth the incredible drive through the mountains, which are almost unavoidable no matter which direction you are traveling in. I cannot say enough about these mountains. Having spent most of my life in the Midwest, waking up to a view of the snow-capped mountains never got old. Luckily, I had plenty of opportunities to trek around. I spent most weekends hiking with Bishkek's Trekking Union, a group that organizes trips into the mountains at a low cost.

My altitude tolerance endured its hardest test during my weekend near Song Kol, the largest freshwater lake in the country at almost 10,000 feet of elevation. In order to access the lake, we first had to travel by marshrutka to a small village at the base of the mountains that house Lake Song Kol. By some strike of luck, my friends and I happened to meet a woman whose family lives near Song Kol in the summer months. She gave us their names and told us that if we could find them, she was sure they would take care of us. A two-hour taxi drive and a lot of asking around later, we did indeed find the woman's family! As with the rest of the inhabitants of the area around lake Song Kol, the family had 3 yurts, one for sleeping, one for cooking, and one for guests. And thus began my obligatory Kyrgyz yurt stay and daily drinking of kumis (fermented mare's milk). The cooler weather of the mountains came to us at a perfect time – Bishkek was hitting around 100 degrees Fahrenheit almost every day by this time in the summer. We left well fed and well hiked, with some extra kumis in our bags.

As I came to learn, any trip to Kyrgyzstan would be incomplete without a visit to Lake Issyk Kul, one of the largest salt lakes in the world. Looking for a peaceful weekend, we chose the quieter, less tourist heavy South side of the lake, settling for the weekend in a guesthouse in the village of Tamga.

The guesthouse was situated right next to the town's sanatorium, where the guidebooks proudly state that Yuri Gagarin once stayed. We spent our afternoons on the beach of the lake and our mornings exploring the nearby Christian/Muslim cemetery and petroglyphs, which required a surprise trek across a river and a payment of 20 soms to a couple of 10-year-old boys who showed us the way.

One of the highlights of the summer was meeting my family (some relatives for the first time!) during a trip to Almaty, Kazakhstan. The end of my stay in Kyrgyzstan happened to coincide with my great
aunt's birthday, for which many family members in the area were traveling to Almaty in order to celebrate. Since Almaty is only a quick 3-hour trip from Bishkek, I made sure to join in. It was at a table of 15 of my Russian-speaking relatives that I was reminded of my reasons for starting to formally learn the language. This was also where my summer of intensive study and immersion was challenged. It was my turn to give a long-winded toast in honor of my great aunt's birthday, and having passed this “test,” I felt ready to return home to Urbana…for now.

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