



Central Asian Celiac Resource Guide

Staying safe on the Silk Road

About the Author

This guide came out of my 10 months in Osh, Kyrgyzstan as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant with celiac disease. I was diagnosed with celiac in 2022, during my senior year of college, and am fairly sensitive to cross-contamination. When I was diagnosed, I was terrified that my celiac disease would stop me from pursuing my dreams of participating in exchange programs. I'm releasing this guide to help make the region more accessible for future program participants or tourists looking to explore this hidden gem!

I also speak Russian, which has been essential to my celiac management strategy. My goal with this guide is to help others who aren't as comfortable with Russian or a regional language access safe foods. That's why I've included a few sections on basic Russian and Kyrgyz, as well as my own celiac explanation cards.

The following guide is based purely on my own experiences in Central Asia from September 2023 to June 2024. My recommendations do not represent any organization's official standpoint. Please be aware that things may have changed since this guide was written.



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General Travel Tips

Plane Travel

As soon as your tickets are booked, reach out to the airline and request a gluten-free or low-gluten meal. This can usually be done through the airline's app or on your reservation page.

Note: requesting a gluten-free meal does **not** guarantee that your meal will actually be gluten-free. Here are a few ways you can double-check your meal once it's served to you on the plane:

- Did your meal come out before everyone else's?
- Is your meal clearly labeled as gluten-free or low-gluten?
- Are any items in the meal individually wrapped, indicating they are gluten-free?
- Look at the main dish. Does it appear to contain any ingredients that can have "sneaky gluten," like soy sauce?



An excellent example of why you always need to bring your own food - my requested meal didn't make it on the plane, so a nice flight attendant gave me a banana and a peach instead.

Prepping For Travel

If possible, try to minimize your time door-to-door. You should always bring snacks with you, in case your airline meal doesn't work out or you get hungry while traveling. The shorter your trip, the fewer snacks you need to have in your carry-on luggage.

If you'll be in another country for an extended trip or are particularly concerned about finding food for yourself, bringing quick and easy snacks or meals in your checked luggage is also an excellent idea. I personally like bringing dehydrated camping meals, which are typically very filling and only require hot water.

You should also have a plan for your first few meals in-country. There's nothing worse than landing after a long flight and needing to go to the grocery store before you can get a few hours of sleep or waking up hungry. This is where I usually bring a few extra snacks to tide me over.

In the Airport

Most airports will not have dedicated gluten-free restaurants, though you might get lucky. FindMeGlutenFree or various Celiac Travel Facebook Groups can help you check ahead of time. Airport food is never the best, though, so it's best to eat a big meal before you leave. You can usually find some small snack items, like bananas or gluten-free chips, but these won't be very satisfying.

Cooking Upon Arrival

Find out as much information about your cooking options as you can. Do you have a microwave? A stove? A dishwasher? This will determine how much cooking you can do and what you should bring with you or buy upon arrival.

I prefer booking AirBnbs, which usually have full (and private) kitchens. Hostels also often have a shared kitchen. Because I know I'll have access to a stove, I usually bring my own set of hiking pots/pans. Mine aren't very fancy, but they allow me to safely cook for myself on shared stoves. They're also designed to stack together and are sized for one person, which makes them a lot easier to carry.

Buying new cookware when you arrive is another option. Metal silverware in particular can be difficult to transport, so I'd recommend bringing only plastic spoons/forks or chopsticks in your carry-on bags and being prepared to leave them behind if required. In Central Asia, I'd recommend buying these things from a permanent store or supermarket rather than the open-air markets called bazaars, as you can be more certain that it's unused, clean, and has not accidentally been exposed to breadcrumbs.

Best Practices

Do Your Research

Research your destination before you leave! FindMeGlutenFree works well in popular tourist destinations, though the listings in Central Asia are sparse to say the least. Facebook groups are another good crowd-sourced way to collect recommendations.

You might get some traction posting in non-celiac groups. I used Expats in Bishkek before arriving in Kyrgyzstan. Not everyone will have an in-depth understanding of the requirements of the diet, but you can get a head start creating your list of options from those sources.

In Central Asia, Instagram is king for advertising stores or restaurants. Many companies do not have official webpages, only Instagram and WhatsApp accounts. Checking their feeds can help you determine if what you've found online will be a good place to go in person.

Bring Snacks

There's nothing worse than traveling on an empty stomach! It's always a good idea to have some of your favorite, non-perishable snacks with you. These can come in handy if there's an issue with the food you're served on a flight, if the restaurant you wanted to visit is closed, or if you get hungry while away from your kitchen.

My personal favorite snacks are protein bars, cheese, and dried meat. For shorter day trips, I'll also bring some fruit along, though I try to avoid doing that when flying because of agricultural restrictions. Fresh fruit can be extra tricky because it needs to be protected from being crushed and it can produce sticky, juicy trash. Dried fruit is a good option if consumed before landing, though. I also make sure to have a drink accessible.

For longer trips or hiking trips, bringing dehydrated camping meals can be a great way to ensure you're not going hungry. I brought several with me

from the US as back-ups. Because of the preference for tea in the region, hot water is often available. Try to avoid using shared electric kettles, though, as people will sometimes use them to cook dumplings.

Rely on Naturally Gluten-Free Foods

When in doubt, search for whole, naturally gluten-free foods. You can almost always find fruit, vegetables, meat, and rice or potatoes at a local grocery store. I will also often bring some of my favorite spice mix to add some flavor to an otherwise bland meal. I really enjoy BADIA's Complete Seasoning.

The downside of these foods is that they require a lot more effort to prepare. To make things easier, try meal prepping. I find it's easier to get myself to chop up my vegetables for the next few days when I've already got the cutting board out. Another tip is to make a larger portion of your dinner so that you can have leftovers for lunch the next day.

Because these meals require a kitchen, they can be a little trickier. I always bring a small kitchen set with me when I travel. This includes a dish sponge/scrubber, drying cloth, plates/silverware, and a camping pot/pan set. When possible, I bring my own knife, but I have also bought a knife after arriving with only my carry-on bags.

General Central Asia Tips

Specialty stores for allergen-free foods are often called “eco-stores” and their products may be called “eco-food” or “pp,” which refers to “healthy eating” in Russian. These products are often gluten, lactose, and sugar free. These stores are concentrated in major cities, though some gluten-free products can be found in other regions depending on the country.

Non-Allergy Food Safety

Meat in Central Asia is most commonly horse, chicken, and beef. It is possible to find pork products, but because of the majority Muslim population, these are typically rarer. Vegetarians who avoid meat will be happy to know that factory farms are uncommon to nonexistent in the region. Many families bring their livestock to graze freely in summer pastures called jailoos, and halal butchery practices are extremely common.



Almost all foods are sold in supermarkets and bazaars, though they may be impacted by seasonal demand. It is fairly common for stores to run out of staple products like milk or eggs briefly, and almost all produce is organic. The widespread belief is that produce sold at the bazaar is cheaper and better, though this usually requires haggling. Meat is also sold at bazaars and is typically not refrigerated throughout the day. Bazaars and stores may lose power fairly frequently, particularly during the spring and fall, so use discretion when buying refrigerated or frozen items - it's typically recommended to purchase these items only from supermarkets.

Water

It is safe to use water directly from the tap to wash dishes, rinse produce (do so thoroughly, as produce purchased from the bazaar often has had minimal processing), and brush teeth. Most prefer to use a water filter or purchase bottled water rather than drink directly from the tap. Boiling water is typically not necessary, but happens frequently as tea is very popular across the region.

Being a Guest

Most cultures in Central Asia place a lot of value on hosting guests, a remnant of nomadic practices requiring one to welcome strangers warmly. A typical meal will include a table full of fruit (dried and fresh), nuts, candy, tea, and lots of bread. Smaller salads or dishes like holodets may also be included. At special events, main courses are brought out later, including plov, lagman, or beshbarmak.



The photo on the left shows traditional Central Asian drinks: maksim (top left) and kvass (top right) both contain wheat, though chalap (bottom) is gluten-free, if an acquired taste.

Many traditional hosting practices involve allergens, particularly gluten. The first step at a group meal is almost always to break apart large, round loaves of bread, which has a tendency to spray crumbs across the table. Bread or other gluten-containing foods will often be offered to you, even set before you or on your plate, even if you explain that you can't eat them.

My main strategy at such events is to politely explain that I have allergies, so I can't have any of the prepared food. I would instead take some fruit, preferably bananas because the peel ensures no bread crumbs reach the edible part. I will also drink several cups of tea and try to steer the conversation towards other topics to avoid lingering attention on what I'm eating.

Later, I may explain my diet a little more if people seem interested. I emphasize that I need to be the one to prepare any food I consume and reassure my hosts that this is something I have to do in every country. At the end of the meal, I always express my appreciation for their hosting efforts.

Delivery Orders

Food delivery is expanding in Central Asia! That being said, the timelines for delivery are very different compared to the US or Western Europe. I have used delivery services in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Each time, it has taken at least a half hour longer than the estimated delivery time. I would recommend picking up your food in person, whenever possible. Otherwise, plan to be at the delivery location for at least three hours around your estimated delivery time.

Kazakhstan

Allergy awareness in Kazakhstan seemed higher than many of the other places I've visited. I was able to find allergy warnings on menus and saw gluten-free products stocked in standard grocery stores.

Brand and Store Recommendations

My research was conducted while I attended a week-long conference in Almaty, so my recommendations are exclusively located in Almaty. However, it was very easy to find safe food in the center of the city.

- [Rice Spoon](#): dedicated gluten-free bakery with ready-to-eat food, pre-made dumplings, and delivery options.
 - This is the first dedicated gluten-free bakery in Central Asia, created by a mother after her son was diagnosed with celiac disease. They have a wonderful selection of sweet and savory options, with food that's ready-to-eat or frozen and easy to prepare at home.



- Magnum Super: gluten-free pasta, naturally gluten-free whole foods.
 - This is a common chain supermarket in Kazakhstan.
- [Daredzhani](#): Georgian restaurant.
 - This restaurant had an allergy disclaimer on their menu, which is a very good sign! I didn't personally try anything, though, as I

was only stopping by briefly for a glass of wine with friends.

- [EcoCakes](#): no physical store, delivery only. Gluten-free desserts.
- [Livefood Eco Market](#): likely gluten-free pasta, gluten-free crackers.
 - I didn't make it in person to this place, but they would likely have some generic gluten-free products.

Kyrgyzstan

Allergy awareness is rapidly expanding in Kyrgyzstan, though overall understanding is not particularly high. The most familiar allergies or food intolerances are lactose intolerance and vegetarianism, though the latter is often thought to apply only to red meat (i.e. chicken or fish may still be served). There is very little understanding of cross-contamination and what foods contain gluten, though most people are not overly pushy with food after learning it is due to an allergy. They may recommend various folk medicine cures, though, which can range from herbs to spending more time in the mountains.

Brand and Store Recommendations

- Bishkek
 - [Green Valley Eco Market](#): gluten-free specialty products including frozen dumplings, frozen pizzas, individual slices of cake, flours and flour blends, crackers, and pasta as well as lactose-free milk.
 - [Legend Steak Restaurant in the Sheraton](#): steaks and salads.
 - A late find and not particularly budget-friendly, I ate at the Legend twice with no ill effects. The steaks are all safe, as is the Legend salad.



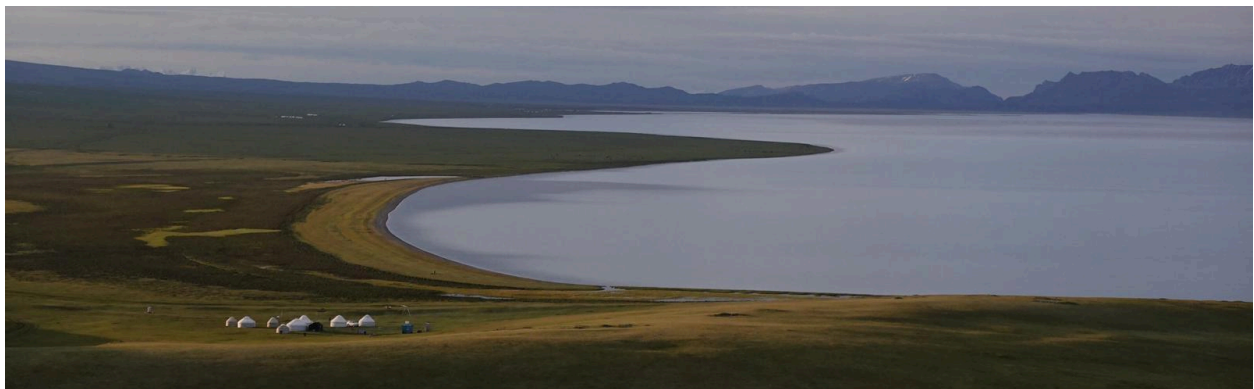


- Yummyy.kg: a dedicated gluten-free bakery whose products are stocked in Green Valley Eco Market.
 - I love their honey cake and have been to their dedicated storefront twice.



- Globus: naturally gluten-free whole foods.
 - Globus is a large chain store with locations throughout the city and elsewhere in the country.
- Osh
 - [Osh Market](#): gluten-free pasta, gluten-free soy sauce, gluten-free sweet snacks/cookies, and naturally gluten-free whole foods as well as lactose-free milk and milk alternatives.
 - Globus: naturally gluten-free whole foods.

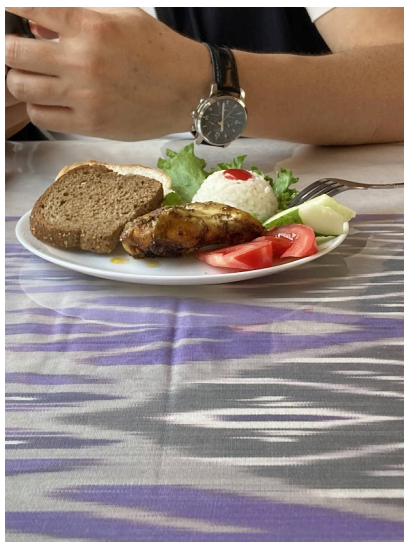
- Karakol
 - Asia Market: gluten-free pasta, naturally gluten-free whole foods.
 - Asia Market is another chain store in the country.
- Naryn
 - Globus: naturally gluten-free whole foods.
- Song Kul
 - [Azamat yurt camp](#): while I wouldn't trust their home cooking to be free from cross-contamination, the hostess of this camp gave me a giant thermos of hot water so I could easily make the camping meals I'd brought with me.



Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan had one of the best selections of gluten-free food in Central Asia during my time in the region. I found two different sit-down restaurants which were safe, including one that is dedicated gluten-free.

It is fairly easy to find gluten-free products in grocery stores in both Tashkent and Samarkand. However, options are more limited in smaller towns, including Bukhara. The country's train system makes travel between cities easier. The overnight trains also have hot water dispensers called samovars in each wagon, so camping meals are a great idea for long trips. Meals on the Afrosiyob, the fast train, are limited and not gluten-free.



Brand and Store Recommendations

- Tashkent
 - [Besh Qozon](#): one of the top attractions in Tashkent, this is a massive plov center with dedicated areas for several different types of plov. Although plov is traditionally served with bread, the dish itself is naturally gluten-free. I tested this myself and am happy to report that their olive oil plov did not cause a reaction (and was very tasty).

- The location I visited was right next to the Tashkent Television Tower. To order, find an empty table and flag down a waiter. Tell them what type and amount of plov you'd like to eat, as well as any extras like tea. You will receive a plate of plov from a different waiter along with a small receipt. After eating, take the receipt to a "kassa" and pay.



- [Organic Food](#): a dedicated gluten-free restaurant and bakery. This was my favorite place in Uzbekistan. They have sit-down seating, full meals, and gluten-free specialty products for purchase, both homemade and commercial.
 - If you're looking to try a samsa, a traditional Central Asian meat-filled pastry, check out their location on 17 Shastri Street, near EcoPark.



- [Organic Food's stand in the EcoBazaar](#): this location had a similar, if reduced selection of gluten-free packaged foods.
 - Open daily from 9:00am - 10:00pm. Eco Bazaar, 3a Temur Malik Street. Contact number 88 425 88 87
- Samarkand
 - [Samyak](#): import grocery store that stocks a wide range of gluten-free products, including brands like Schar. Note that products here may be more expensive.



Tajikistan

While in Tajikistan, I spent all of my time in the capital city, Dushanbe. Tajikistan is the poorest Central Asian country and is generally less developed. Gluten-free options here are a lot more limited, so it is important to bring your own staple products before traveling to Tajikistan.

I had trouble finding gluten-free pasta, the most common specialty gluten-free food in Central Asia, in the local supermarkets. Instead, it's best to rely on naturally gluten-free whole foods like meat, vegetables, and rice. However, I was able to find a bakery offering gluten-free bread and desserts for delivery in Dushanbe.

One other thing to note about Dushanbe is that taxi drivers don't know street addresses. Instead, to get places in the city, you have to name a specific landmark nearby for the driver.

Brand and Store Recommendations

- Motiland.tj: delivery only bakery that offers gluten-free bread and mochi. By Tajikistan standards, fairly expensive but very delicious.
 - My favorite was the mochi with chocolate goulash filling.
- [Paikar](#): a local grocery store chain, which sometimes stocks gluten-free pasta.
 - I found some at a location two blocks east of the KFC on Rudaki, but the "Big Paikar" on Rudaki itself didn't have any. Look for the turquoise/light blue bags, that brand is typically gluten-free.
 - You can also find gluten-free whole foods here.



Celiac Explanation Cards in Russian and Kyrgyz

One common resource for traveling are explanation cards. They come in many languages and help explain celiac disease. You can print them out before traveling and give them to waiters, who will bring them to the chef to confirm if there are safe food options at that particular restaurant.

A good explanation card goes beyond the basics by mentioning cross-contamination and common foods that must be avoided. I have successfully used them when I didn't speak the language, so they're always a good back-up to have. It's important to note that mistakes can still happen, so use your own best judgment about what to eat.

English

Hello! I have celiac disease, which means I cannot have any gluten. Gluten is a protein found in wheat, barley, and rye. This means I cannot eat any bread, noodles, or baked goods. I also cannot eat beshbarmak, samsa, and lagman. Gluten is also in soy sauce, kvass, and maksim. If I eat even just a little bit of gluten, I will get very sick.

I also have to avoid cross-contamination. Even one crumb of bread can make me sick. I can eat rice, fruit, vegetables, meat, dairy products, and eggs. Do you have any food that is cooked on a separate pan, using separate utensils, without any gluten?

Russian

Привет! У меня целиакия, а это значит, что я не могу употреблять глютен. Глютен - это белок, который содержится в пшенице, ячмене и ржи. Это означает, что **я не могу есть** хлеб, лапшу или хлебобулочные изделия. Я также не могу есть бешбармак, самсу и лагман. Глютен также содержится в соевом соусе, квасе и максиме. Если я съем хотя бы немного глютена, мне будет очень плохо.

Я также должна избегать перекрестного заражения. Даже от одной крошки хлеба меня может стошнить. Я могу есть рис, фрукты, овощи, мясо, молочные продукты и яйца. Есть ли у вас какие-нибудь блюда, которые готовятся на отдельной сковороде, в отдельной посуде и без глютена?

Kyrgyz

Салам! Менде целиакия оорусу бар, демек, мен курамында глютен бар азыктарды жей албайм. Глютен-буудай, арпа жана кара буудайда кездешкен белок. Бул мен нан, макарон же бышырылган азыктарды жей албайм дегенди билдирет. Ошондой эле бешбармак, самса жана лагманды жей албайм. Глютен соя соусунда, кваста жана максимде да бар. Эгер мен бир аз глютен жесем дагы, катуу ооруп калам.

Ошондой эле, мен кайчылаш булгануудан (глютен бар азыктарды кармоодон, башка адамдын жеке буюмдарын (фартук, идиш- аяк ж.б. кармоодон) алыс болушум керек. Жада калса бир күкүм нан мени оорутушу мүмкүн. Мен күрүч, мөмө-жемиштер, жашылчалар, эт, сүт азыктары жана жумуртка жей алам. Сизде глютенсиз, өзүнчө идиштерди колдонуп, өзүнчө идишке бышырылган тамак барбы?

Russian and Kyrgyz for Allergies

Note: this section has been formatted to easily import the words and phrases into a flashcard program of your choice.

Russian

У меня аллергия за... I am allergic to...

Я не могу есть... I cannot eat...

Если я ем ---, я заболею. I will get sick if I eat...

В этом блюде есть ---? Does this dish have...?

Спасибо, но... Thank you, but...

Чай есть? Do you have tea?

Глютен Gluten

Лактос Lactose

Орехи Nuts

Мясо Meat* (note: in Central Asia, chicken is not always considered meat)

Kyrgyz

Аллергиям бар... I am allergic to...

Мен жей албайм... I cannot eat...

Жесем ооруп калам... I will get sick if I eat...

Бул тамактын...барбы? Does this dish have...?

Рахмат, бирок... Thank you, but...

Чай барбы? Do you have tea?

Глютен Gluten

Лактоза Lactose

Жаңгактар Nuts

Эт Meat