

Snapshot from...



Larger than Western Europe, Kazakhstan lies at the heart of Central Asia and the New Silk Road. Strategically located between Russia and China - and blessed with a veritable cornucopia of natural resources from oil and gas to gold, uranium and diamonds - Kazakhstan has made great strides in building a market economy since achieving independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. A beguiling mix of the ultra-modern and the traditional, Kazakhstan has much to offer interested visitors from stunning scenery to sights of historic significance, as well a fascinating and distinct culture forged in the crucible of Eurasia's oldest crossroads.

Downtown Astana



Founded in 1830 as Akmola, Astana became the nation's new capital in 1997, replacing the old Czarist and Soviet era capital of Almaty. Now Kazakhstan's second largest city, Astana's impressive skyline epitomises 21st century Kazakhstan – modern, dynamic and bustling with life and commerce. Its new name means, quite simply, “The Capital” in Kazakh. The brainchild of Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, Astana offers an intriguing blend of old monumental Soviet architecture with cutting edge modern designs courtesy of leading world architects such as Britain's Sir Norman Foster.

Surely the most emblematic icon of modern Astana is Foster's 105m Baiterek Tower, affectionately known by locals as the Chupa Chups due to an alleged resemblance to the well-known lollipop brand of that name. The name actually means “tall poplar tree” and the design embodies an old Kazakh folktale concerning the mythical tree of life and the magical Samruk bird, which laid its egg between two of its branches.

Other Astana architectural highlights include the 150m Khan Shatyr shopping centre, designed by Foster to resemble a giant tent hark back to the Kazakh people's nomadic roots, the pyramidal Palace of Peace and Reconciliation, periodic host of the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions and the President's Museum of Kazakhstan, also built like a yurt but with the addition of a dome resembling that of a mosque.

Turkistan and the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi

If Astana represents modern Kazakhstan and its aspirations, the old city of Turkistan could stand for its rich traditional and Islamic heritage. With an archaeological record dating back to 4thc CE, Turkistan - also known historically as Yasi and Shavgar - rose to prominence as a trading centre in the 15thc CE under the Timurid dynasty, founded by the famous Central Asian conqueror Timur (Tamburlaine).



In the 11thc, the city was home to the renowned Turkic poet and Sufi mystic Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, and quickly became a major pilgrimage site after his death. Indeed, according to certain local traditions, three pilgrimages to Turkistan are equivalent to one hajj to Mecca – the city is even styled by some “Second Mecca of the East”.

Undoubtedly the highlight of any visit to Turkistan is the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, commissioned by Timur himself in 1389 but sadly unfinished at his death in 1405 when construction halted. Despite its incomplete state, the mausoleum remains extremely impressive and is held to mark the beginning of the renowned Timurid architectural style. Little surprise then that the mausoleum has become an icon of Kazakh national identity and the nation's leading UNESCO world heritage site.



Tamalgy Petroglyphs

If Astana represents Kazakhstan's present and future aspirations and Turkistan the glories of its Islamic past, the mysterious Tamalgy petroglyphs (rock carvings), another UNESCO world heritage site, harks back to earlier eras.

Meaning "painted or marked place" in Kazakh and related Turkic languages, the Tamalgy gorge in the Chu-Ili mountains is home to over 5,000 petroglyphs dating from the Bronze Age in the second millennium BC to – astonishingly – the beginning of the last century. A large

number of ancient tombs, also of Bronze Age vintage, can be found at Tamalgy, as well as what are believed to be altars used for sacrificial offerings.

Distributed among 48 complexes and associated settlements and burial grounds, the Tamalgy petroglyphs include representations of solar deities, warriors, pregnant women, animals, hunters and scenes of animal sacrifice – moving testimonies to the social, artistic and spiritual sophistication of the pastoral peoples of ancient Kazakhstan.

Saukele Headdresses

If one image could sum up for most Westerners the romanticism of the Silk Road and Central Asia, the stunning headdresses of Kazakhstan would surely be contenders. Best known today are the Saukele or women's wedding headdresses, no two of which are identical though all preserve the same shape and decoration of traditional patterns. Worn by brides until the end of the 19thc CE, Saukele were traditionally inherited from the mother or another older female representative. A year after her wedding, a bride gained the right to switch to the practical and comfortable married woman's headdress, or "zhelek", thus the Saukele represented the transition from girl to woman. (After the birth of her first child, a Kazakh lady would then move on to her third style of headdress, the "kimeshek")

Usually about 1.5 feet long and decorated with gold and silver coins, precious stones, pearls, corals and silk and velvet scarfs, the most extravagant Saukele could cost a thousand roubles, or hundred horses – a large sum in 19thc Kazakhstan - and take master jeweller a year to make!

Abay Qunanbayuli

Amongst the most beloved of Kazakh poets, Abay Qunanbayuli (1845 –1904) was also a composer, philosopher and cultural reformer who sought to forge a modern Kazakh cultural revival combining the best of Russian and European innovation with an enlightened and reinvigorated Islam. He is universally acknowledged as the first and greatest Kazakh writer and the founder of modern Kazakh literature.

Born in Eastern Kazakhstan in what is now the Abay District named in his honour, his actual birth name was Ibrahim, but thanks to the intelligence and maturity he displayed from an early age, he acquired the nickname Abay, meaning "careful", which stuck for the rest of his life. Influenced by the writings of Lermontov and Pushkin, Abay's greatest contribution to Kazakh culture was his poetry with its origins in traditional Kazakh oral folklore. His vision of a revived Kazakh culture combining the best aspects of both Western and Islamic civilisations is encapsulated in his greatest work, "The Book of Words"- both a philosophic treatise and poetry collection in which he exhorts his fellow Kazakhs to embrace modern education, literacy and personal morality to revive the nation from the mire of poverty, enslavement and corruption he felt it had fallen into.

The Alash Orda movement, which sought autonomy for the Kazakh people in the wake of the Russian Revolution acknowledged him as their prime inspiration and spiritual predecessor, a status he retains in now independent Kazakhstan to this day.

Hunting with Eagles

Falconry was known across medieval Europe and the Islamic world as the sport of kings. For European and Middle Eastern royalty, the goshawk was the ne plus ultra of hunting birds – but for the Kazakhs and their Kyrgyz neighbours, mere goshawks simply didn't cut the mustard. For a real sport of kings, only specially trained golden eagles would do. Eagle falconers were known in Old Turkic as "kush begi" – Qusbegi in Kazakh – quite literally "lord of birds" from "qus" bird and "bek" lord, and counted among a Khan's most respected and senior advisers.

Today no longer a sport simply for khans and sultans, eagle falconry remains popular across the Kazakh diaspora (notably in Mongolia) as well as amongst the Kyrgyz, with foxes the prey of choice. For any would be Lord of Birds, the annual Golden Eagle Festival is the calendar event of the year with over 70 participating hunters generally participating. Held in the ethnic Kazakh Mongolian region of Bayan-Olgii in the Altai Mountains and inaugurated in 1999, the festival is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Event.



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Will Salomone for the New Silk Road Forum

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