

Almighty Almaty



Kazakhstan calls for travellers in search of a crowd-free escape post-pandemic, writes **Nick Redmayne**

Let's be clear – national dress in Kazakhstan is not a moustache and a mankini. Sasha Baron Cohen's Borat certainly lent the country some unexpected name recognition, but that's where it ended.

Bordering Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea, Kazakhstan is enormous. The size of western Europe with a population of fewer than 19 million, as befits the Kazakh people's nomadic heritage, the country's key characteristic is its expanse of wilderness.

The Kazakh government has been making tourism development a priority in recent years, with 30-day visa-free entry for UK visitors since 2015. Roads linking major centres continue to be upgraded. A favourable tax regime, reduced bureaucracy and hospitality training have seen family guesthouses open in villages and towns across the country, providing a great way to see the 'real' Kazakhstan.

Pre-pandemic, tourist numbers were still relatively low, at around 20,000 each year, meaning travellers seeking a socially-distanced escape should find

what they're looking for when the country reopens. And with a seven-hour flight from the UK, it's easily accessible for those seeking a closer-to-home alternative to long-haul adventures.

CITYSCAPES AND SNOWY PEAKS

Realistically, it's impossible to 'do' Kazakhstan in one tour – it's just too big. Most visitors pass quickly through soulless Nur-Sultan and head southeast to erstwhile capital Almaty. This is a beautiful city of wide, tree-lined avenues, Tsarist, Soviet and modern architecture, historic parks, welcoming bars and funky cafes. It is also well-located for exploring the remarkably diverse Almaty region – itself the size of the United Kingdom.

Taking the cable car to the summit of Kok-Tobe Hill affords views over Almaty's cityscape. Look the other way and an unbroken wilderness leads to the distant, 4,500m snowy peaks of the Tian Shan mountains.

The city's single metro line serves some sights, its stations exercises in municipal art. The Republic ➤

Almaty and the Tian Shan mountains

PICTURE: Shutterstock / Almazoff

DESTINATIONS

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GETTING THERE

Airlines serving Almaty include Air Astana, Lufthansa, Turkish Airlines and the much-improved Aeroflot. National carrier Air Astana operates regular flights from Heathrow to Almaty via Kazakhstan's capital, Nur-Sultan, from around £420 return. airastana.com



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Altyn-Emel National Park;
Shymbulak ski resort;
Ascension Cathedral, Almaty

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Kiwisoul, Nataliya Nazarova, Leonid Andronov

Square's architecture has a distinctly Soviet feel, while at Zelyony Bazaar, there's everything from Tajik apricots and dried mulberries to pickled vegetables, kumis (fermented mare's milk) and horse meat.

Downtown, Panfilov Park has an immense Soviet memorial dedicated to the 600,000-plus Kazakhs killed in the Great Patriotic War. Through the trees and across a plaza of pigeons, Ascension Cathedral is a beautiful example of early 20th-century Orthodox architecture.

At the end of a day's sightseeing, Frau Irma, on the central Kurmangazy Street, does good bistro food accompanied by its own fragrant unfiltered beer.

Just outside Almaty, Ile-Alatau National Park has numerous hiking trails set among the 4,000m peaks of the Zailisky Alatau mountain range. Nearby, from November to May, the 2,200m-high Shymbulak is a European-standard ski resort with modern infrastructure and corresponding prices.

INTO THE WILDERNESS

Some 185 miles north of Almaty, Altyn-Emel National Park delivers expansive, wild landscapes and rugged mountains. Designated a Unesco World Biosphere Reserve, the park's Ile River Valley is home to endangered species including the Transcaspiian wild ass, the ancient Przewalski horse and Altai argali wild sheep.

Away from the Ile River, hikes among the colourful geology of the fossil-rich Aktau mountains are truly astonishing. For those sure-footed and reasonably fit, the landscape is nothing short of otherworldly.

However, close to the Ile River at a site known as Besshatyr, people too have left their mark in a necropolis of 31 kurgan burial mounds, the largest 17m high and 105m in diameter, constructed from the seventh century BC by nomadic Saka tribes. Nearby, among the volcanic boulders of Terekty gorge, devoid of interpretive signs, hundreds of petroglyphs depict game animals and sun-faced deities.

At the park's Singing Dunes, if conditions are right, wind catching the sand causes a bizarre humming sound. Climbing the 120m dunes isn't easy, but views over the Ile River as the sun sets are worth the effort.

PEACE AND QUIET

In the far southeastern Charyn National Park, a fast-flowing tributary of the Ile River has carved a canyon of epic proportions through sedimentary rock. Sometimes reaching up to 300m deep, the Valley of Castles is one of the canyon's most scenic stretches. It's a remote and dramatic landscape best accessed by 4x4. It's hardly surprising that Land Rover recently filmed an ad here.

Close to the Kyrgyz border and among the mountains of the Kungey Alatau, Kolsai Lakes' wooded shores and tranquil waters are among the most peaceful and scenic spots in Kazakhstan. The first two high-altitude lakes are accessible by road, the third only by hiking trail. A few miles away, Lake Kaindy, created by an earthquake in the late 19th century, is another easier hike.

In the past, the Soviets used Kazakhstan's vast territory as a place to lose people, exiling whole populations and building gulags to house 'enemies of the state'. In an increasingly always-on, always-connected world, Kazakhstan today provides the space for travellers in search of a different life to find themselves. **TW**

BOOK IT

Explore offers a 14-day Across the Kazakh Steppe small-group tour from Almaty to Astana from £3,345 per person, including accommodation, transport, tour leader, all breakfasts and some other meals, departing June 6 and September 26, 2022. Flights are not included. explore.co.uk