

Kazakhstan

Қазақстан

The world's ninth-biggest country has finally edged into global consciousness. Long regarded as little more than a big blank space in the middle of Asia, Kazakhstan has made it onto the map thanks to the judicious use of its vast mineral resources in its two decades as a nation, with a little helping hand – since all publicity is good publicity – from that pseudo-Kazakh Borat Sagdiyev and his 2006 calumnies upon its people.

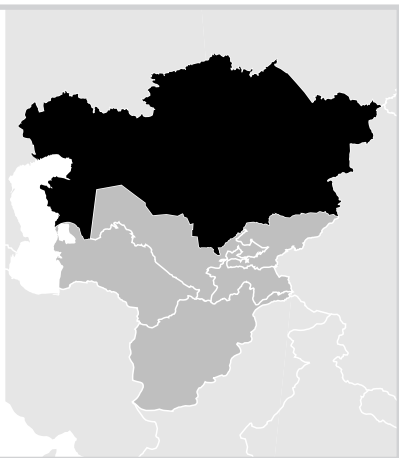
The most economically advanced of the 'stans', Kazakhstan has reinvented itself since the Soviet collapse as a uniquely prosperous and modern Eurasian nation. The commercial and social hub, Almaty, has an almost European feel with its boutiques, chic cafes and avant-garde arts and club scene. Astana, in the north, has been transformed into a 21st-century capital with a profusion of stunning futuristic architecture. President Nazarbaev, who has ruled Kazakhstan since Soviet times, certainly doesn't encourage political opposition but has managed to forge a peaceful, confident, multiethnic nation – which makes him by and large pretty popular.

The country's southern fringe, on old silk routes and the edge of the Tian Shan, has always attracted a flow of Central Asia travellers. Today, with better transport and better facilities of every kind, it's easier than ever before to soak up the soulful rhythms of the boundless steppe, to watch flamingos on salty inland lakes, or to discover mysterious underground mosques near the Caspian Sea. Homestay programs in some of the most beautiful areas help to offset the fact that Kazakhstan is overall the most expensive country in Central Asia.

Travellers are still rare enough here for a foreign guest to be treated not as just another tourist but with real warmth and hospitality. Enjoy it while it lasts!

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 2.7 million sq km
- **Capital** Astana
- **Country code** ☎ 7 (the same as Russia)
- **Famous for** oil, steppe, Borat
- **Languages** Kazakh, Russian
- **Money** tenge (T); US\$1 = 145T; €1 = 200T
- **Off the map** Beket-Ata, Sauran
- **Phrases** *salemetsiz be* (hello); *rakhmet* (thanks)
- **Population** 16 million



HOW MUCH?

- **Snickers bar** US\$0.60
- **100km bus ride** US\$2
- **One-minute phone call to the USA/UK** US\$0.70
- **Internet per hour** US\$1.70
- **Traditional hat** US\$10
- **1L petrol** US\$0.65
- **1L bottled water** US\$0.55
- **Bottle of local beer** US\$0.70
- **Shashlyk** from US\$2

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Almaty** (p126) Leafy, sophisticated metropolis with spectacular mountains on its doorstep.
- **Aksu-Zhabagyly Nature Reserve** (p155) Hikes, homestays and horse rides amid gorgeous mountain scenery.
- **Astana** (p172) Twenty-first-century fantasy architecture in a brand-new capital.
- **Turkistan** (p157) Beautiful Timurid architecture at the country's holiest site.
- **Mangistau** (p170) Remote desert country honeycombed with canyons, weird rock outcrops, underground mosques, ancient necropolises and wandering camels.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore Almaty by foot, taking in Panfilov Park (p131), the Central State Museum (p131) and the Kok-Tobe cable car (p132), and make a trip into the mountains south of the city (p144). If you're travelling on to Kyrgyzstan in summer, use the Karkara Valley crossing (p147).
- **One week** Extend the three-day itinerary with time in southern Kazakhstan – Shymkent (p151), lovely Aksu-Zhabagyly Nature Reserve (p155) and the splendour of Turkistan (p157) – or head for Astana (p172), Kazakhstan's spectacular capital-under-construction.
- **Two weeks** The extra week allows for a more leisurely exploration of the one-week options, adding in the magnificent central Tian Shan (p148) in Kazakhstan's southeastern corner or explorations of the central steppe (p184) or the mountain country out of Ust-Kamenogorsk (p188).

- **One month** You can get around the whole country, taking in more adventurous destinations such as the Aral Sea (p162), the strange underground mosques and dramatic rock formations of the deserts outside Aktau (p170), or the pristine, gorgeously beautiful Altay Mountains (p188) in the northeast.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Like the rest of Central Asia, Kazakhstan has hot summers and very cold winters. During the hottest months, July and August, average daily maximums reach the high 20°Cs in Almaty and Astana.

In Almaty, temperatures typically remain below freezing for much of December, January and February. The ground is snow-covered for an average 111 days a year. In sub-Siberian Astana there's frost from October to April, with temperatures lurking between -10°C and -20°C from December to February.

Annual precipitation ranges from less than 100mm a year in the deserts to 1500mm in the Altay Mountains.

You can travel at any time of year with the right preparation and logistics, but the most comfortable months are May to September. July to September is best for trekking in the southeastern and eastern mountains. See p499 for an Almaty climate chart.

HISTORY

Kazakhstan as a single entity with defined boundaries was an invention of the Soviet regime in the 1920s. Before that, this territory – apart from the far south, which was within the ambit of the settled Silk Road civilisations of Transoxiana – was part of the domain of nomadic horseback animal herders that stretched right across the Asian steppe and into eastern Europe. Some of the various peoples here at times fell under the sway of regional or continental potentates; at other times they were left to sort themselves out. A people who can be identified as Kazakhs emerged in southeastern Kazakhstan in the 15th century. Over time they came to cover a territory roughly approximating modern Kazakhstan, though some of this territory continued to be governed periodically from elsewhere and/or occupied by other peoples. The borders of Kazakhstan established by its Soviet rulers excluded some Kazakh-populated areas and included some areas with non-Kazakh populations.