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customs & culture

CULTURE SMART!

KAZAKHSTAN



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KAZAKHSTAN

Dina Zhansagimova

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DINA ZHANSAGIMOVA is a Kazakh journalist living in Almaty. After graduating in economics from the Kazakh State University, and gaining an MBA, she became a reporter covering news and current affairs for Kazakh television companies. She then joined the UN Development Program to work on social development projects in Kazakhstan, traveling to some of the most remote regions of the country. In 2003 she was invited to London by the BBC World Service to broadcast news programs in Kazakh. Later she moved to the BBC World Service Trust, the BBC's international development charity, where she ran a number of media projects in Eurasia, before eventually returning to Almaty.

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contents

Cover

Title Page

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About the Author

Map of Kazakhstan

Introduction

Key Facts

Chapter 1: LAND AND PEOPLE

- Geography
- Climate
- The People
- The Languages
- A Brief History
- Government and Politics
- The Economy
- The Environment

Chapter 2: VALUES AND ATTITUDES

- Traditional Kazakh Values
- Spiritual Values
- The Soviet Legacy
- Religion
- Position and Power
- Women
- Attitudes Toward Education
- Attitudes Toward Work

Chapter 3: CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

- Birth and Infancy
- Weddings
- Mourning and Remembrance
- Traditional Horseback Games
- Public Holidays
- *Subbotnik*

Chapter 4: MAKING FRIENDS

- Friendship
- Attitudes Toward Foreigners
- Invitations Home
- Entertaining
- Dating

Chapter 5: AT HOME

- Housing
- The Household
- The Daily Round

- Everyday Shopping
- Children
- Education
- Health Care

Chapter 6: TIME OUT

- Eating Out
- Nightlife
- Cultural Life
- Sports and Outdoor Activities
- Shopping for Pleasure
- Some “Must-See” Attractions

Chapter 7: TRAVEL, HEALTH, AND SAFETY

- Intercity Travel
- Getting Around Town
- Where to Stay
- Health
- Safety and Security

Chapter 8: BUSINESS BRIEFING

- The Business Environment
- Management Culture
- Labor Relations
- Personal Relationships
- Business Correspondence
- Meetings
- Presentations
- Negotiations
- Contracts
- Managing Disagreements
- Women in Business
- Corruption
- Business Gifts

Chapter 9: COMMUNICATING

- Language
- Body Language
- Forms of Address
- Humor
- The Media
- Services
- Conclusion

Further Reading

Acknowledgments

Map of Kazakhstan



introduction

Kazakhstan, one of the largest countries in the world, was long hidden from the West—first under Russian tsarist rule and then behind the Soviet Iron Curtain. After gaining independence in 1991 the country continued to remain unnoticed among all the “stans” of Central Asia; now, twenty years on, it has emerged as a modern state with far-reaching ambitions. Free-market reforms and rising oil exports have made Kazakhstan the richest country in Central Asia. It has a vibrant economy, a stable business environment, and a friendly social scene.

The first thing that takes visitors by surprise is the sheer size of the country. For many of those who are reading this book on the inward flight, much of the journey will be over Kazakh land. Seen from the sky, the grasslands are a seemingly endless expanse, but although they may look a little featureless and dull to you they are a source of immense pride to the Kazakhs: these are lands they have kept against all the odds during their grim history. If people on the plane cheer and applaud on landing, they will be Kazakhs, rejoicing at the return to their beloved country.

The modern Kazakh people emerged after the rise and fall of a succession of medieval Turkic states, before being absorbed into the Russian Empire. They were self-reliant pastoral nomads, open hearted, generous, and tolerant, with laws of hospitality that put guests above all. These characteristics have survived to this day, so don't be put off by the serious faces that you will see in the street—these are just the masks that people grew accustomed to wearing to survive the hardships of the Soviet era. Once you get to know the local people, their genuine warmth, kindness, and loyalty will soon become evident.

There are many contrasts and extremes in Kazakhstan, and you may not like everyone and everything you see. You may find some of the apparent contradictions bewildering—not least, Asians speaking Russian, who follow a mixture of Muslim, Soviet, and earlier pagan traditions. This book sets out to introduce you to this complex, unknown nation. It guides you through its history, traditions, and social values so that you will be able to identify the signs of its Soviet totalitarian heritage, of Russian cultural influence, and of the Asian mentality with its deep respect for power and hierarchy. It tells you about the Kazakhs at work, at home, at leisure, and in the street; it describes how they celebrate their holidays, and what they eat and drink.

A review of Kazakhstan's dynamic business culture and economy shows that honesty and straight dealing are paramount when conducting business with local partners. Foreigners find it very pleasing to work and live in a country that is truly open and receptive to outside influences. All that is needed is a

little patience and tact, and you will be rewarded many times over.

Kazakhstanga khosh keldingiz!

Welcome to Kazakhstan!

Key Facts

Country Name	Republic of Kazakhstan	
Capital	Astana	Second-largest city after Almaty
Main Cities	Almaty, Shymkent, Taraz, Aktau, Atyrau, Oral, Kostanai, Aktobe, Petropavl, Karagandy, Pavlodar, Semei, Oskemen, Kyzylorda, Taldykorgan	
Population	16 million (2009 census). 2013 estimates suggest nearly 17 million	Population density is low.
Area	1 million sq. miles (2.7 million sq. km)	Ninth-biggest country in the world
Ethnic Makeup	Kazakhs 63%, Russians 24%, others 13%	Others include Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Uighurs, Tatars, Belarusians, Germans, Koreans.
Border Countries	Russia, China, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan	The country also borders the Caspian Sea, which is landlocked.
Climate	Acutely continental: dry, hot summers, very cold winters, and low precipitation. Milder in the south	Best times to visit are April–June and September–October.
	Presidential republic.	President is elected every five years by

Government	Legislature is bicameral. Government is appointed by the President.	popular vote. Constitution allows for two consecutive presidential terms.
Literacy	99%	Kazakhstanis are entitled to free secondary education.
Languages	Kazakh and Russian	60% fluent in Kazakh; 85% fluent in Russian
Religion	Islam (70%) and Russian Orthodox Christianity (26%)	
Age Structure	Under 18, 26.4%; 18-63, 63.6%; over 63, 10%	18–63 is the working age in Kazakhstan for women and men.
Unemployment	Just over 5%	
GDP per capita	11,400 USD (2011)	
Currency	Kazakh Tenge (KZT)	1 US Dollar equals around 150 KZT (2013)
Electricity	220 volts, 50 Hz	Two-prong plugs
Video/TV	PAL/SECAM	NTSC not supported
Internet Domain	.kz	
Telephone	Kazakhstan country code is +7 Astana code is 717 Almaty code is 727	To call out dial 8, then 10, and country code.
Time Zone	GMT + 6	

LAND & PEOPLE

chapter one

GEOGRAPHY

Kazakhstan is a vast area of land in the heart of Eurasia, stretching nearly two thousand miles (3,000 km) from west to east, with a south–north range of more than a thousand miles (1,600 km). This huge territory is chiefly flat, covered in grass and shrubs, and is usually referred to as the Kazakh Steppe—a word of Russian derivation that can be defined as “terrain between forest and desert.” Much of the Kazakh Steppe is semi-desert, and it gradually turns into desert farther south. The country is bordered by Russia’s Ural Mountains in the northwest and a string of mighty mountain ranges along the south and east. The highest peak, Mount Khan Tengri (“Ruler of the Sky”), reaches nearly 23,000 feet (7,010 m). To the west lies the Caspian Sea, the largest lake on Earth, and the source of 90 percent of the world’s caviar.

As many visitors to Kazakhstan can confirm, the size of the country really does matter, and not just from the traveling point of view. It is central to understanding the history of this place and its people. Endless grassland reaching the skyline, without a soul to be seen for many miles, is the essence of everything Kazakh. The territory is a staggering 1 million square miles (2.7 million sq. km)—about the size of Western Europe—with a mere sixteen million inhabitants (2009 census), most of whom live in the larger cities. Away from the towns it is not unusual to drive for hours without meeting anyone. This is especially true for the least-populated central and southwestern areas of the country.



Kazakhstan is not as monotonous as it may sound, however. In fact, the country features an exceptional variety of landscapes that often contrast with one another. The steppe itself, primarily in the center of the country, can take you by surprise with its many fresh and saltwater lakes, which attract a great variety of waterfowl, and hilly areas that reach up to 4,900 feet (1500 m) in height. Southern Kazakhstan, which was once crossed by an important branch of the Silk Road, boasts the well-watered and forested Karatau Mountains (Black Mountains), an area rich in plant life and home to many rare birds.

In the north the steppe suddenly turns into a delightful and diverse region full of rivers, lakes, hills, and forests. These are some of the most photographed places in the country, famous among vacationers from other regions and neighboring Russia. However, the most stunning views are to be found in and around the high Tien Shan, the mountain range in the southeast, and the Altai Mountains in the northeast. These two huge massifs are the main attraction—apart from the Caspian oil and gas industry—for most visitors who come to Kazakhstan.



The largest cities in Kazakhstan are Almaty in the southeast (the busiest and most developed in infrastructure), the entrepreneurial and trading city of Shymkent in the south, and the industrial town of Karaganda in central Kazakhstan. No less important are the new showcase capital of Astana in the north and Atyrau in the west—home to a large expatriate community working in the oil sector.

CLIMATE

Apart from its size, another distinctive feature of Kazakhstan is its distance from the sea in all directions: it is as landlocked as it is possible to be. The country's only coastlines lie on closed seas—the Caspian and the Aral—which are, in fact, classified as lakes. This distance from the sea means that the country's climate is generally described as acutely continental, with hot, dry summers, very cold winters, and low precipitation. In the north the summer temperatures average 68°F (20°C) and winter temperatures average -4°F (-20°C). Extremes are not unusual: 104°F (40°C) in summer, and winter temperatures of -40°F (-40°C) are far from rare, especially in the central steppe and in the northeast. The ground is covered by snow for nearly six months, from late October to early April. Winds, including the occasional *buran*—the strong snowy wind from the northeast—are typical.

“THE KAZAKH SWITZERLAND”

The most beautiful mountainous spots are naively nicknamed “the Kazakh Switzerland” by the locals. This stems from a sense of pride at the scarce and precious beauties that nature has given this otherwise plain land. A legend from Burabay, in Kazakhstan's north, reflects this. It tells how, when God created the Earth and its people, He began distributing mountains, seas, lakes, rivers, and fertile farmland among the different peoples. Everyone was happy except for the Kazakhs, who got nothing but endless, naked steppe. The steppe people asked the Creator to show them some mercy: can a whole nation survive in a land of bare steppe and desert? God looked inside his bag for the few treasures left, and threw all the remaining mountains, forests, streams, and lakes into the middle of the steppe. It turned out that those remnants were the best of all he had given—and that is how the most beautiful spot in the world was created. Burabay, its people say, is matched in beauty only by Switzerland.

In the south the climate is milder, with less contrast, though summers are hot. In Almaty, the average temperature in July and August is 79°F (26°C), and by Kazakhstan standards the winters here are not as harsh as in the north, though temperatures occasionally fall to -4°F (-20°C). However, the high

humidity levels typical of the area of Almaty, sheltered by the Tien Shan range, ensure that you feel the cold down to your bones. Sensitivity toward both the humidity and the outside temperature are different for local people and western travelers, so it is not always helpful to assume that what the natives are wearing is an indication of the temperature.

There are some winter hazards common to the larger towns and cities that you should be aware of. One is ice on the sidewalks—broken bones and sprained ankles are not unusual, even for ice-savvy locals. A second is that icicles fall from multistory apartment blocks; injuries from these are rare, but they can potentially kill. A third hazard is the marble floors in some new buildings, which can be extremely slippery when wet.

Further south, in the region bordering Uzbekistan, winters are much milder, with temperatures averaging 30°F (-1°C).

THE PEOPLE

Historically this land was populated by a Turkic people called the Kazakhs, meaning, in their language, free warriors or wanderers. They now comprise 63 percent of the country's population of more than sixteen million. The remainder is a mixture of nationalities that migrated or were forced to move to Kazakhstan as the price of coexistence with Russia's tsarist and Soviet regimes. The country's Slavic population is dominated by Russians (24 percent of the total population, or about 3.8 million people) and includes Ukrainians (330,000 people), Belarusians (70,000), and Poles (34,000). Other major groups include ethnic Uzbeks (nearly half a million), Uighurs (225,000), Tatars (around 200,000), Germans (nearly 180,000), and Koreans (more than 100,000). Turks (Meskhetian), Kurds, Greeks, Jews, Gypsies, and some of the North and South Caucasus ethnic groups are less distinguishable yet have long been part of Kazakhstan's history.

There is no formal or clear division of territories populated by one ethnic group or another, though southern parts are dominated by Turkic and Muslim groups (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Chinese Muslim Dungans, Turks, and others) while the northern areas are largely settled by Slavic and German peoples. Culturally, however, there is no great distinction between the communities, due to the long shared history and common usage of the Russian language. In towns and cities the division is even less noticeable. Kazakhs are truly proud of the fact that since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 there has been no noteworthy tension between the various nationality groups as in other parts of Central Asia. Some give credit to the traditional Kazakh values of tolerance and respect, and some to President Nazarbayev's success in restraining any outbreaks of nationalism.

Economically, Kazakhstanis are considered to be far better off than their Central Asian neighbors. Officially in 2010 there were just over a million people (6.5 percent of the total population) living below the minimum subsistence level. This figure was nearly five times lower than that for 2000.

Government reforms of pensions and social welfare provision have succeeded in their attempt to address poverty in a comprehensive way. The official 2010 unemployment rate was 5.8 percent, half that of 2000.

These figures, however, do not reflect the disparity among social groups or the contrast between rural and urban life. In 2010 the top 10 percent had official incomes that were nearly six times greater than the bottom 10 percent. The actual gap is believed to be much greater. As in the other parts of the former Soviet Union, “the rich” are a relatively new class that emerged in the 1990s. Most are businessmen, who hugely benefited from early market reforms and privatization, and senior civil servants with power and connections to large business.

The poorest groups are to be found in the countryside, where nearly half of Kazakhstan’s population lives. The rural poverty level is three times higher than that in towns and cities. You don’t need to travel far into the heart of Kazakhstan’s steppe to realize that the rural economy is in a submarginal state. The outskirts of the country’s brand new capital, Astana, are a grim reminder of the fact that Kazakhstan is still a country in transition, with a long way to go to achieve prosperity for all its people.

If, however, you are in the heart of one of the bigger cities, like Almaty, Astana, or Atyrau, you are most likely to encounter the well-educated and fairly prosperous middle class. These are people who have adapted well to recent economic changes. The younger they are, the more likely they are to be progressive thinkers, free from the Soviet legacy, and eager to get the most out of their lives.

The Kazakhs

The Kazakhs are the dominant ethnic group in the country, but this wasn’t always the case. Russia’s imperial and then Soviet policy led to sharp falls in the Kazakh population during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many fled from new administrative changes and taxes imposed by the tsarist government, and many more died or were killed during the years of starvation and genocide of the 1930s Stalinist era. By 1939 there were fewer than 2.5 million Kazakhs left in the country. The picture changed after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, when many of Kazakhstan’s Russians, Germans, and other ethnic groups that had either been forcibly settled in the country or had immigrated willingly in recent centuries chose to move back to their historic lands, while ethnic Kazakh communities living abroad started to settle back in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhs are generally perceived by fellow and neighboring nations as a very tolerant and open people who value two main things above all: peace, and their guests. Nomadic in the past, the Kazakhs have kept their friendliness and tradition of care toward travelers and newcomers, whether these visitors feel overwhelmed by the grasslands or just alone and awkward in an unfamiliar place.

In appearance, Kazakhs have Asian features, but there are distinctions between the browner southerners and the fairer-skinned northerly type; manners, language, and general conduct, however, really show the difference. Northern Kazakhs tend to regard the southerners as unintellectual and boastful, but respect their business sense; Southerners regard most of their northerly compatriots as being too slow in making decisions and generally boring. The most arrogant of all may be the inhabitants of Almaty—Kazakh or of any other nationality—who regard themselves as much more sophisticated because of the city’s historic capital status.



As mentioned above, many Kazakh families that had fled the country in the early twentieth century are returning to settle there. Since independence, nearly half a million ethnic Kazakhs have been repatriated to various parts of Kazakhstan. They are called *oralmans* (returnees), and they form a new and unique group in modern Kazakh society. They managed to preserve the Kazakh language and customs while living abroad, and are also bringing back aspects of other cultures. While much has been done to support them in their resettlement, their economic and social integration remains a significant challenge. They are one of the most vulnerable groups living in the country, lacking the means and the skills to prosper in their new environment. Some have successfully integrated, but many have chosen to return to the regions from which they originally came. It is sad that local Kazakhs who had previously demonstrated remarkable tolerance toward newcomers from various backgrounds in the earlier periods of history are showing a less welcoming attitude toward those returning.

The Russians

Russians are the second-largest ethnic group living in the country. They dominated the population during the years of the Soviet Union, but millions migrated to Russia in fear of economic depression and discrimination after the Union’s breakup in 1991. Their fears did not materialize, and some of those who left in the early days of independence have since returned, but their status as citizens of independent Kazakhstan has changed.

Even though Russians still represent nearly a quarter of the country’s population, their current representation in the government is minimal in

comparison to the earlier Soviet period, when Russians were not just an ethnic majority but were also the political and social elite. At independence the Kazakh language became the official “state” language, and although Russian was given special status, remaining the main language used in the public sector, the change was hard for the non-Kazakh population, especially those in middle age. During the Soviet era Russian was introduced as the official language, and the general policy was that knowing Kazakh was not necessary. As a result, many Kazakh families, especially those in the bigger cities, lost their knowledge of their language. Official use of Kazakh is still quite limited, and learning it is not yet the norm.

The younger generation of Russians has adapted well to living in the newly created state. Russians nowadays are the bedrock of the country’s urban middle class, owning small and medium-sized businesses in the manufacturing, trade, transport, communication, IT, and service sectors. However, wealthier Russian families try to send their children to study at Russian or Western European universities, preparing the ground for their smooth relocation in the future.

On an individual level there is a strongly sympathetic attitude, across all levels of society, toward Russians, who are regarded as honest, hardworking, and conscientious. Intermarriage between Russians and other nationality groups is still not common, but lifelong friendships are often made.

The Rest

A small percentage of the population are neither Kazakh nor Russian. Most of these people were settled under a number of forced Soviet migration campaigns before and following the outbreak of the Second World War. Then, in the 1950s, many more immigrated willingly as part of the Virgin Lands campaign to cultivate cereals in the steppe. Some ethnic communities, such as the Uzbeks and the Dungans, had settled in Kazakhstan long before the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1917 for reasons of trade, business, and agriculture.

Most of these long-settled immigrants live in the southeast and south, the most fertile areas of the country, in distinct communities with their own subcultures and traditions. The main sources of income are agriculture—especially the growing of fruit and vegetables—and trade. The younger generation, notably Koreans and Azeris, are increasingly working in the bigger cities, in business, the financial sector, and banking.

THE LANGUAGES

Kazakhstan is a bilingual country. The dominant language used across all strata of society, especially in towns and cities, is still Russian, in which, according to the 2009 census, 85 percent of the population are fluent. Russian has special status as a language that can be used alongside Kazakh in

government and public institutions.

Kazakh is the state or national language, and is promoted as a priority language to be used by government institutions and in Parliament. Its actual use by politicians is limited, however, due to the large number of Russian-speaking civil servants who do not know it well enough. It is widely used at an informal level, but less so during official meetings or in correspondence. However, it is the dominant language among the rural population, and about 60 percent of Kazakhstanis are fluent in Kazakh.

There is growing criticism over the constitutional status of Russian from some parts of the Kazakh community, who see it as the main obstacle to the development of Kazakh as the first language in the country. On the other hand, there are fears that stripping Russian of its official status may lead to another wave of emigration by Russian and other Slavic communities.

English is understood by about 15 percent of the population, with fewer than 8 percent conversing and writing fluently. Even on the streets of the biggest cities in Kazakhstan a visitor cannot expect to be understood in English.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Modern-day Kazakhs trace their direct racial ancestry to Turkic nomadic tribes who migrated to this region from what is now Mongolia and northern China. The early Turks, however, were not the first nomads to come to the vast steppe lands now known as Kazakhstan. Between 500 and 200 BCE, the land was home to the early nomadic warrior culture of the Saka (Scythian) tribes, who had migrated from the Black Sea coast to the foothills of the Altai Mountains, replacing earlier Stone and Bronze Age settlers.



The Turks

The earliest Turkic-speaking peoples to arrive from the East were the Usuns, the Kangui, the Alans, and the Huns. They settled the Kazakh steppe lands from around 200 BCE to 500 CE. Around 550 CE the first feudal state, the Turkic Khaganate (empire), presided over by a *khagan*, or emperor, emerged. Later in the seventh or eighth centuries this empire was superseded by another Turkic tribe, the Tyurgesh. These were strong empires that prospered from the fabled Silk Road, a trading corridor that linked Europe to China and played a

significant role in the commercial, cultural, and political development of the Central Asian steppes.

Despite its strengths, the region was unable to withstand attacks from the Arabs, who began their conquest of Central Asia under the banner of Islam in the mid-eighth century. They attacked the Tyurgesh Empire, eventually causing the Khaganate to collapse. Gradually Islam replaced Tengrism, Buddhism, and other religions that had hitherto been widespread. The Arab conquest also brought the Arabic script, which was to replace the Turkic alphabet previously in use.



Later the Arab Caliphate weakened and in 766 a new Khaganate was established in the far south of Kazakhstan by another nomadic Turkic tribe, the Karluks. In 940 their state was taken under the control of yet another semi-nomadic people, the Karakhanid tribe. The Karakhanids had by and large adopted Islam, and many took up a more settled way of life, cultivating fruit, vegetables, and cereals.

In the twelfth century the Khaganate fell to a wave of attacks from the east, and the Muslim Karakhanid tribe were displaced by the Karakitae, a Buddhist people from the territory that is now Mongolia. They created a new Central Asian state known as the Karakitay Empire.

Meanwhile the Oghuz Turkic tribes were settling in the steppes around the Aral Sea in Western Kazakhstan. Their state was soon absorbed by yet another powerful nomadic tribe, the Kypchak, known in the West as the Cumans. Through the next few centuries more nomadic tribes—the Kidans, Naimans, and Kerei—left their traces on the region's culture and history.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE KARAKHANIDS

This was a period of overall stability and growth that benefited the development of southern cities such as Taraz and Yassy. (Around the fifteenth century Yassy was renamed as Turkestan, the name used by Russians to label the entire region.) It was also