

EXPLORE!

Across the Kazakh Steppe
14 days

Kazakhstan - Trip code KAZ

Across the Kazakh Steppe

On this adventure through the largest and wealthiest of the 'Stans, we explore the leafy streets of Almaty, discover Silk Road history in Turkestan and uncover eerie rusting ships in the middle of the desert where the Aral Sea once was. We also visit the Cosmodrome at Baikonur where we learn about the Soviet and now Russian space programmes. The tour finishes in Kazakhstan's wealthy capital, where gleaming glass-fronted buildings unashamedly jostle for position to catch the eye.

Trip highlights

- ★ **Almaty** - Discover this leafy city nestled in the foothills of the Alatau Mountain range
- ★ **Altyn Emel National Park** - Explore wide open landscapes and colourful mountains
- ★ **Turkestan** - Uncover UNESCO World Heritage monuments in this ancient Silk Road city
- ★ **Baikonur** - Visit the Baikonur Cosmodrome, explore a decommissioned spacecraft and sit in a cosmonaut's seat.
- ★ **Astana** - Explore Kazakhstan's uber-modern capital with its glittering skyscrapers and bizarre architecture.

ACCOMMODATION GRADE:

Standard

Our standard, mid-range accommodation offers a good level of service, often with other amenities such as a restaurant, bar, garden or swimming pool. Generally rooms will be comfortable with en suite facilities.

TRIP PACE:**Moderate**

Moderate pace tours are ideal if you want a holiday which combines exciting activities and experiences with plenty of time to relax and unwind. Typically you'll be active and busy for part of the day but then also have time to rest and recharge your batteries.

GROUP SIZE:**10 - 16**

Maximum group size ranges from between 6 to 20 people, depending on the type of trip, the transport and accommodation used and activities included. We rarely have groups that are smaller than five or six people and the average is 12 people plus an Explore leader.

Itinerary

Itineraries on some departure dates may differ, please select the itinerary that you wish to explore.

DAY 1 - Join trip in Almaty

Arrive in Almaty and check-in to the hotel, where the remainder of the day is at leisure.

Almaty ceded capital status to Astana in 1997, but it still remains the cultural and financial centre, where Russians, nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tartars and many other ethnic groups rub shoulders in its bustling markets.

The city has a leafy, almost European feel, partly due to the earthquake in 1911 that flattened Almaty resulting in the complete re-planning and re-building of the city. Wide-leafy boulevards were constructed and lined with low-rise white-washed housing and offices, and the few period buildings that remained intact were restored to their former glory. The city enjoys an enviable position, nestled in the foothills of the Zailiysky Alatau mountains, with beautiful turquoise lakes, snow-capped mountains and chic ski resorts just a short drive away.



Accommodation: Kazzhol Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Swimming pool available



Single room available



Meals Provided: None

DAY 2 - Full day exploring the old capital of Almaty

Today we set out to explore some of the city's major sites, starting in the Park of 28 guards. The park is diverse, serving as popular meeting place for locals as well as housing a variety of important monuments and buildings. The park's focal point is the Ascension Cathedral, a beautiful Russian Orthodox style Cathedral and one of only two wooden buildings left in the city. Also found in the park are imposing Soviet statues remembering falling soldiers from campaigns such as WW2 and the Afghan War, where many

Kazakh nationals fought to support the USSR's interests. We also visit the Museum of Musical Instruments, the other wooden-structure building that would look more at home in Switzerland than in Central Asia. It showcases a wide-variety of folk instruments that are both native to Kazakhstan, or were brought by travellers from throughout Central Asia and Persia.

We then move onto Green Market, a fascinating meeting place for the city's locals to come for their daily shop. The market offers an eclectic range of produce brought by nomads as far flung as Korea, all the way through China and Central Asia. Here you can find exotic fruits, vegetables, an extensive butchery section with all types of meat and a wide variety of savoury foods. Make sure to try Kazzan (smoked horse sausage) and Kurt (salted cheese balls popular with beer).



Accommodation: Kazzhol Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Swimming pool available



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 3 - Morning drive to Altyn Emel National Park, afternoon visit to 'Singing Dune'

As we head out of Almaty this morning, the urban sprawl of the city limits quickly give way to wide open plains, our first experience of the vastness of the Kazakh Steppe. It's a pleasant drive that passes several lakes before the tarmac changes to gravel on the last 40 kilometre stretch to the national park. Our guesthouse is located in a small village on the fringes of park, offering a chance to sample a taste of a real Kazakh village life.

This afternoon we set off for the Singing Dune. This huge 150 metre high sand dune is a geographical phenomenon, seemingly arbitrarily located in the middle of a rocky desert. Stranger still is the sound emitted from the sand when a combination of just the right conditions comes together - namely strong wind in the correct direction and a dry heat. It's not so much a singing but a low rumble similar to that of a jet engine, an eerie experience that is exacerbated by the deathly quiet desert environment that surrounds the dune.

We plan to hike to the top of the dune, a walk of approximately 650 metres in length and a 150 metres ascent. It can be quite hard-going in the heat and the soft sand, but the panoramic views from the top make the hard work more than worth it. For those that want to, there is the option to return to the bottom via the tried and tested 'sitting down and sliding' method, which interestingly produces the same 'singing' sound!



Accommodation: Altyn Emel Guest House (or similar)



Simple Guesthouse



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 4 - Full day exploring the hills and gorges of Altyn Emel National Park

Today we have the full day to explore the huge and bizarre landscapes of Altyn Emel National Park. The park covers some 4,600

square kilometres of desert and rocky terrain, and as we make our way through the park it's not uncommon to see gazelles bounding across the expanse, and animals such as lynx, Tien Shen brown bear, polecat and stone martens are also present here, albeit more difficult to spot.

We first plan to visit the mounds of Besshaty, an Iron Age sight that served as a ritual burial ground for important warriors from previous civilisations that passed through these lands. We next move onto the Aktau Mountains, a series of jagged mountains of striking beauty. Literally translated to 'White Mountains', the mountains appear a white hue from a distance, but as we get closer deep crimsons, bright yellows and vivid oranges become visible. We will take a short one hour walk into the mountains, following a dried-up riverbed that has cut its winding way through the terrain. We climb a small rise that affords us wonderful views of the surrounding mountains and ample photo opportunities. After a picnic lunch, we continue onto Katatau Volcanic mountains, a deep-red rock formation formed by ancient lava flows by a now-extinct volcano. We make our way back to our guest house in the late afternoon, where the rest of the day is at leisure. You may like to take a short walk around the vicinity for a chance to witness daily life in this sleepy Kazakh village.



Accommodation: Altyn Emel Guest House (or similar)



Simple Guesthouse



Meals Provided: Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

DAY 5 - Morning visit to Charyn Canyon, afternoon drive to Almaty and overnight train to Shymkent

We set off for Charyn Canyon this morning, in the far-east of Kazakhstan and just a stone's throw from the Chinese border. After travelling across the wide open expanses of the Kazakh Steppe, the Canyon adds another dimension to the landscape, plunging to a depth of 100 metres and extending for 80 kilometres in length. We stop off at a view point perfect for photos of the canyon, before descending into the valley to walk along one of the deeper sections.

After lunch we drive back to Almaty, where we make our way to the train station for our overnight train to Shymkent. Although there is a restaurant cart onboard, there will be a chance to buy snacks and drinks before we board the train. Our accommodation on the train will be in 2nd class sleeper - a private lockable cabin containing 2 lower and 2 upper beds, with toilets located at each end of the carriage. Bedding is provided, but you may wish to take a sleeping sheet for your own comfort.



Accommodation: Overnight Train from Almaty to Shymkent (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 6 - Morning at leisure in Shymkent, afternoon exploring the city's parks and museums

Upon arrival in Shymkent, we will drive to the hotel where our rooms are available to freshen up and relax in for the morning. After lunch we set out on a tour of Shymkent, one of three of the ancient Silk Road cities in Kazakhstan and a once-major trading post of Tamerlane's empire. We visit the Museum of History which cites the various military campaigns to sweep through Central Asia and Kazakhstan, before exploring the Museum of Political Repressions, which offers a very frank view on the effects of the Stalinist era rule over the Kazakh population. Shymkent is known locally for its collection of parks and large green areas, and we will take some

time this afternoon to see some of the best, including a walk through Abaya Park with its well-tended gardens and memorials of fallen soldiers from Soviet military campaigns.



Accommodation: Shymkent Grand Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Swimming pool available



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 7 - Drive to Turkestan and explore this old Silk Road trading post

We make the short three hour drive to Turkestan this morning, and after lunch we set off to explore this ancient city. The city has been through several incarnations, first featuring as a centre-point on trade routes across Asia in the 5th Century, it then shot to prominence in the 12th Century when the revered poet and scholar Khoka Ahmad Yasavi set it up as a centre for learned scholars. As well as being a central city to Tamerlane's rule, it was also the capital of the Kazakh Khanate.

Turkestan's stand-out monument is the 14th Century Mausoleum dedicated to the scholar Yasavi, which was commissioned by none other than Tamerlane himself. The turquoise-blue domes rival those of Samarkand and the building has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. We spend time in and around this beautiful building this afternoon, as well as learning about the city's rich history when visiting the Hazrat Sultan complex and the mausoleum of the Kazakh Khan Esim.



Accommodation: Khanaka Hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 8 - Catch the day train to Aral Sea, travelling across the vast Kazakh Steppe

We rise early this morning to catch the train to Aralsk. The train ride takes us across the wide sweeping expanse of the Kazakh Steppe, and is a comfortable way to take in the huge landscapes that makes up much of this country. With few tourists in Kazakhstan, we expect to find ourselves causing a stir of interest among the locals, so we hope for some good opportunities today to engage with friendly Kazakhs with the help of our Explore Leader.

Today will be a long day of travelling, anticipated to be around 13 hours so be sure to bring a book, perhaps some playing cards and plenty of snacks. There is a restaurant cart on the train, and the setup is a 'two seats facing two seats' type configuration, with a table in-between. Toilets are available at either end of the carriage. The train will make several stops along the journey where it possible to get out and stretch the legs.

The train is scheduled to arrive into Aralsk in the early evening.



Accommodation: Nur Guest House (or similar)



Simple Guesthouse



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 9 - Explore the stricken village of Aralsk, a once-busy trading port on the Aral Sea

The Aral Sea is one of the great geological disasters of modern times, losing an estimated 90% of its mass over a period of 40 years. In the 1960's Soviet engineers decided to divert the main rivers that fed the Aral Sea to irrigate nearby desert areas in a bid to encourage agriculture. In the years that followed the waters rapidly receded, many of the fish perished due to the increase of salinity of the water, and a once-thriving fishing industry died. At one point the Aral Sea provided one sixth of the fish eaten in the USSR, now all that remains are rusting shipwrecks stricken in the middle of a desert, and abandoned towns; a sobering reminder of the devastating impact humans can have when tampering with the powers of nature.

We set off by 4WD today to explore Aralsk and its immediate surroundings. We first visit the Tsarist train station, complete with a poignant mural depicting Aralsk villagers providing fish for the people starving in Russia in 1921. The town has a small museum that provides further information on the disaster and charts the various efforts made to restore water to the area, efforts that are now, thankfully, starting to bear fruit. We then spend time driving over the former sea bed to see the stricken rusted ships that have been left out in the desert, along with other pieces of Soviet engineering that interrupt the otherwise-barren landscape.



Accommodation: Nur Guest House (or similar)



Simple Guesthouse



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 10 - Travel by train to Baikonur, late afternoon free

After a leisurely breakfast we make our way back to the train station for the four hour journey to the town of Baikonur. The town itself is very isolated, hundreds of kilometres in any direction from nearby towns it was a perfect location to build a secret USSR Cosmodrome in the height of the 'Space Race'. Nowadays the Russians effectively 'rent' Baikonur from the Kazakhs, a lease that lasts until 2050 and is worth \$100 million dollars per year.

Upon arrival we transfer to our hotel, a classic Soviet bloc type building that echoes its surroundings. It's clean and functional, but be prepared for it to bear all the hallmarks of the Soviet experience, both in service and comfort. There is some time this afternoon to wander around the town of Baikonur, before we head to the Cosmodrome tomorrow.



Accommodation: Central hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 11 - Explore Baikonur Cosmodrome, and sit in a cosmonaut's seat

Today we visit Baikonur Cosmodrome, one of only two places on earth where humans are regularly thrust into outer space, and the sole launch site for manned missions to the International Space Station (ISS). Previously known as Leninsky and then 'Star City', Baikonur was selected in 1955 as the prime location for the USSR Space programme on account of its wide open steppe and lack of population under the rockets trajectories. Since then it has seen the launch of Sputnik (the first man-made satellite), Yuri Gagarin (the first man in space), Valentina Tereshkova (the first woman in space), and more recently British astronaut Tim Peake's mission to the ISS.

After completing passport checks and formalities, obtaining our special permits and exchanging some Russian roubles, we effectively pass into Russian territory as we set out to explore the Cosmodrome and learn about the fascinating history that has been made here. We visit the house of Yuri Gagarin before continuing onto the Space Museum which details the history of the Soviet and now Russian space programmes. One of the highlights of Baikonur is a visit to the decommissioned Buran spacecraft where we can explore the interior and complete a childhood dream for many - having the chance to sit in a cosmonaut's seat.



Accommodation: Central hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 12 - Drive to Kyzlorda and fly to Kazakhstan's gleaming capital

There is some free time this morning before we leave Baikonur and drive the three hours on well-laid roads (thanks to the Cosmodrome and the Western Europe to Western China project) to Kyzlorda Airport. We then take the short flight to Astana, and after checking into our hotel, the evening is free to explore this modern and vibrant capital.



Accommodation: Empire G hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 13 - Full day to explore the modern city of Astana

In 1997 Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev took the bold decision to move the nation's capital from the charming tree-lined city of Almaty to the wide wind-swept expanses of the northern steppe. Citing Almaty as having a lack of space for expansion,

the capital moved to the site nearby a former gulag and has since been transformed into one of the world's most modern and fastest-growing cities. With the help of British architects Astana's skyline is now peppered with unique buildings and skyscrapers, and is still expanding by the year.

The centre-point of the city and the capital's show piece is the Bayterek Tower, a 100 metre high monument of white latticework topped off with a large golden orb. We visit the tower and take the lift to the top to learn about the symbolism behind the architecture and enjoy extensive views of the city. We also visit the Nur Astana Mosque, an incredible white and gold structure with space for some 5,000 worshippers, and the National Museum with its blue-glass and white-marble cubist structure that showcases a huge array of Kazakh history from Bronze Age to modern day.

The rest of the afternoon is free to either relax or to further explore this beguiling city.



Accommodation: Empire G hotel (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 14 - Trip ends in Astana

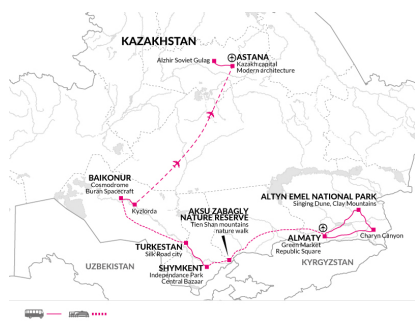
The trip ends in Astana this morning after breakfast.



Meals Provided: Breakfast



2018 itinerary



2019 itinerary

Why book this trip

This trip offers an insight into a little-visited part of Central Asia that has seen ancient Silk Road traders, nomadic war-lords and Russian empires all travel across its lands. Modern-day Kazakhstan proudly showcases all of this history alongside its latest acquirement - its new-found wealth. The vibrant cities of Astana and Almaty offer comfortable hotels, fine restaurants and trendy bars, but the investment has yet to trickle down to the small towns and cities, resulting in comfort levels more akin with Soviet times.

For anybody interested in space travel, this trip offers the opportunity to visit a working cosmodrome and explore decommissioned spacecraft.

What's included?



Included meals

Breakfast: 13
Lunch: 2
Dinner: 2



Transport

Bus
Flight
Train



Trip staff

Explore Tour Leader
Driver(s)
Local Guide(s)



Accommodation

4 nights simple guesthouse
9 nights standard hotel

Trip information

Country information

Kazakhstan

Climate

In summer the temperatures can reach more than 30 °C and in winter around -20 °C (-4.0 °F)

Time difference to GMT

+4

Plugs

2 Pin Round

Religion

Islam

Language

Kazakh, Russian

Budgeting and packing

Clothing

Light-weight natural fabrics such as cotton and linen are most suitable for the hot summers of Central Asia, it is best to avoid synthetic fabrics as temperatures can get very hot in the summer months. During spring and autumn temperatures are cooler and a good fleece is recommended.

Footwear

Good quality, comfortable shoes/trainers and sandals.

Luggage

20kg

Luggage: On tour

Due to the variety of transport on this trip, soft-sided holdalls are recommended.

Equipment

We'd recommend bringing sunscreen, a sunhat and a water bottle

Tipping

Explore leader

At your discretion you might also consider tipping your Tour Leader in appreciation of the efficiency and service you receive.

Local crew

Although entirely voluntary, tipping is a recognized part of life in this region of the world. Some local staff will look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided. In order to make things easier for you, the Tour Leaders may organise a group's tips kitty and if this is the case, they will account for it throughout the tour. Accordingly, you should allow US\$ 35.

Country Information

Kazakhstan

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price

£10

Dinner price

£15

Beer price

£2.5

Water price

£0.5

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Kazakhstani Tenge

Recommended Currency For Exchange

USDollars or Euros are recommended for exchange.

Where To Exchange

Banks, bureaux de change, airports, train stations, ports & large hotels

ATM Availability

ATMs are widely available.

Credit Card Acceptance

Most major credit cards are accepted in large hotels

Travellers Cheques

International traveller's cheques are not widely accepted, and therefore not recommended.

Transport, Accommodation & Meals

Transport Information

Accommodation notes

Booking a Single Room

All of our group tours are planned and operated on a twin-share basis, meaning that the standard cost is based either on individual travellers sharing accommodation with another group member of the same sex, or people who book together sharing accommodation. Please refer to the tour notes where the single room option availability is detailed on a night by night basis for this tour, and the price for the available nights is detailed on the dates & prices tab by departure date. For Self-Guided trips the Single Room supplement offers the option of a single room each and is charged per person. The Single Room supplement also applies to the third person in a party of three that will be accommodated in a single room.

There is a wide variety of accommodation used on this trip; the hotels in Almaty and Astana are modern and comfortable with air-conditioned rooms, a range of facilities and a wide selection at breakfast. Hotels in Shymkent and Turkistan also offer good levels of 3 star comfort, and the guest house in Altyn Emel National Park offers en-suite facilities with hot showers and modern rooms. The accommodation options in Aralsk and Baikonur are very limited and as such the service and comfort levels are not on par with western hotels. Rooms are en-suite but basic, where the décor is likely to be dated and the hot water intermittent.

Essential Information

FCO Advice

We strongly recommend that you check your government's travel advisory for up-to-date information and advice about your destination: safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs. For UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice [click here](#).

For more information from Explore about travel advice, [click here](#)

Under 18 immigration guidance

Please note that some countries require proof of parental consent when travelling overseas with under 18s. Please check requirements with the relevant embassy or consular office well in advance of travel if this applies to your party.

Price Guarantee

Once your booking has been confirmed we guarantee the price will not increase, whatever the circumstances. Before booking please ensure you have read our important tour pricing information. [Booking Conditions](#)

Visa and Passport Information

Kazakhstan: Until 31 December 2018 you can travel to Kazakhstan without a visa, provided your stay does not exceed 30 days. If you wish to stay longer than 30 days, you'll need a visa. You should contact your nearest Embassy of Kazakhstan for further information.

All visa related issues including information for other nationalities should be confirmed with the relevant Embassy prior to departure.

If you do require assistance in obtaining a visa then you may consider applying through Explore's recommended visa service in the UK, Travcour. See www.travcour.com to download the relevant visa application for your trip, if applicable (UK citizens only), along with details of how to apply for your visa through Travcour. The Team at Travcour will be happy to answer specific questions relating to visa applications, please call them directly on 0208 5431846.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, with the correct validity for your chosen destination.

Booking conditions

Before booking your Explore trip, please ensure that you read both our [Essential Information](#) and [Booking Conditions](#).

Transfers

[Find out more about Trip Transfer Terms and Conditions before you book.](#)

Booking a land only package with Explore

Customers who have chosen to book on the 'Land Only' arrangements of our tour, please ensure that you have checked your tour specific 'Joining Instructions' prior to booking your own travel arrangements. Your joining instructions can be found below in the dates and prices information.

You may also be eligible for the Free Explore Transfer.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will now receive a Free Transfer, provided you arrive and depart on the tour only itinerary start and end dates. The transfers will be from the Explore designated airport or train station to the joining point of your tour, and then back from the ending point to the designated airport or train station. The exception to this rule is customers who are booked on a tour where the joining and ending point is at the designated airport or train station.

Free transfers are not available for Self-Guided, Polar, Tailormade or Tours for Churches customers.

If you are not eligible for the Free Transfer then you will need to make your own way through to the joining and ending point. On a majority of our tours Explore will be able to provide a private transfer at an additional cost. Please ask for a quote at the time of booking.

For more information regarding the Explore Free Transfer [click here](#)

Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Explore that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country. Please ensure your policy includes medical emergency helicopter evacuation in the event of illness or injury and covers the entire duration of your holiday. If you are trekking at altitude please ensure that there is no upper altitude limit which may limit or exclude cover for your trip. The cost of many of our Polar Voyages will exceed the capped amount covered by standard insurance premiums and you will be required to pay an additional premium to cover the full value of your trip. Please ensure that you are covered for the full amount of your holiday cost, as insufficient cover could invalidate a claim under the policy. Medical and repatriation insurance cover is not mandatory for UK residents who are travelling on trips within the United Kingdom.

Read more information about what travel insurance is required.

Flight information

Explore offers a wide range of flexible flying options to make joining and leaving our trips easy. [Read more about them here.](#)

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Booking a flight inclusive package with Explore

We have a good selection of flights not only from London but from many regional airports around the UK allowing us to compare fares between scheduled carriers as well as low cost and charter airlines. Our dedicated flights team will match the best flight options to your arrival and departure airport.

On our website we display a UK flight inclusive package guide price which is generally based on a London departure. To avoid paying supplements or to secure your preferred flight option, we recommend booking as early as possible, especially for peak travel dates.

Kazakhstan

Vaccinations

Nothing compulsory, we recommend protection against typhoid, tetanus, diphtheria, polio and hepatitis A. Consult your travel clinic for latest advice on the need for and different prophylaxis available against malaria. Please check the latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at [Explore Travel Health](#) and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.
