

Kazakhstan

Қазақстан

The world's ninth-biggest country is one of its last great travel unknowns. Though the outside world is gradually becoming aware of Kazakhstan, largely thanks to its oil and the antics of that pseudo-Kazakh Borat Sagdiyev, few have explored this country of vastly varied attractions.

The most economically advanced of the 'stans', post-Soviet Kazakhstan is reinventing itself as a uniquely prosperous and modern Eurasian nation. The leafy commercial and social hub, Almaty, has an almost European feel with its quality hotels, slick boutiques, chic cafés and luxurious cars. Astana, in the north, is being transformed at quickfire speed into a 21st-century capital with a mix of Islamic, Western, Soviet and wacky futuristic architecture. President Nazarbaev, who's ruled Kazakhstan since Soviet times, doesn't encourage political opposition but is managing to forge a peaceful, multiethnic nation – which makes him on the whole pretty popular.

Around the great steppes where the once nomadic Kazakh people – still famed for their horse skills – used to roam, Kazakhstan presents an array of adventures. You can trek on foot or horse in the spectacular Tian Shan or Altay Mountains, watch flamingos on steppe lakes or discover mysterious underground mosques near the Caspian Sea. Ecotourism programmes in some of the most beautiful areas enable travellers to stay with village families at affordable cost.

With travellers still rare here, a foreign guest is usually treated not as just another tourist but with real hospitality, and locals will often go out of their way to help you. 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 = 128T; €1 = 177T
- **Phrases** *salemetsiz be* (hello); *rakhmet* (thanks).
- **Population** 15 million



HOW MUCH?

- Snickers bar US\$0.50
- 100km bus ride US\$2
- One-minute phone call to the US/UK US\$2
- Internet per hour US\$1.75
- Traditional hat US\$10
- 1L of bottled water US\$0.50
- Bottle of local beer US\$1
- Shashlyk US\$1
- 1L of petrol US\$0.70

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Almaty** (p113) Leafy, sophisticated metropolis at the foot of the Tian Shan.
- **Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve** (p146) Hikes, homestays and horse rides amid gorgeous mountain scenery.
- **Zailiysky Alatau & Central Tian Shan** (p130, p134 and p137) Great mountain trekking, hiking and climbing.
- **Astana** (p159) Twenty-first-century fantasy architecture in a brand-new capital.
- **Turkistan** (p148) Magnificent Timurid architecture at the country's holiest site.

ITINERARIES

- **Three days** Explore Almaty by foot, taking in Panfilov Park, the Arasan Baths, the Central State Museum and the Kök-Töbe cable car, and make a one- or two-day trip into the mountains south of the city. If you're travelling on to Kyrgyzstan in summer, use the Karkara Valley crossing.
- **One week** Extend the three-day itinerary with time in southern Kazakhstan – Shymkent, lovely Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve and the splendour of Turkistan – or head for the spectacular central Tian Shan in Kazakhstan's far southeastern corner.
- **Two weeks** The extra week allows for a more leisurely exploration of the south and east, adding hiking in the Zhungar Alatau mountains (from Lepsinsk) or the Altay, and a visit to Kazakhstan's capital-under-construction, Astana.
- **One month** You can get around the whole country, taking in more adventurous destinations such as the Aral Sea and

the strange underground mosques and dramatic rock formations of the deserts outside Aktau.

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.

During the tourist low-season months of November to March, frosty mornings are typical in Almaty and temperatures there 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.

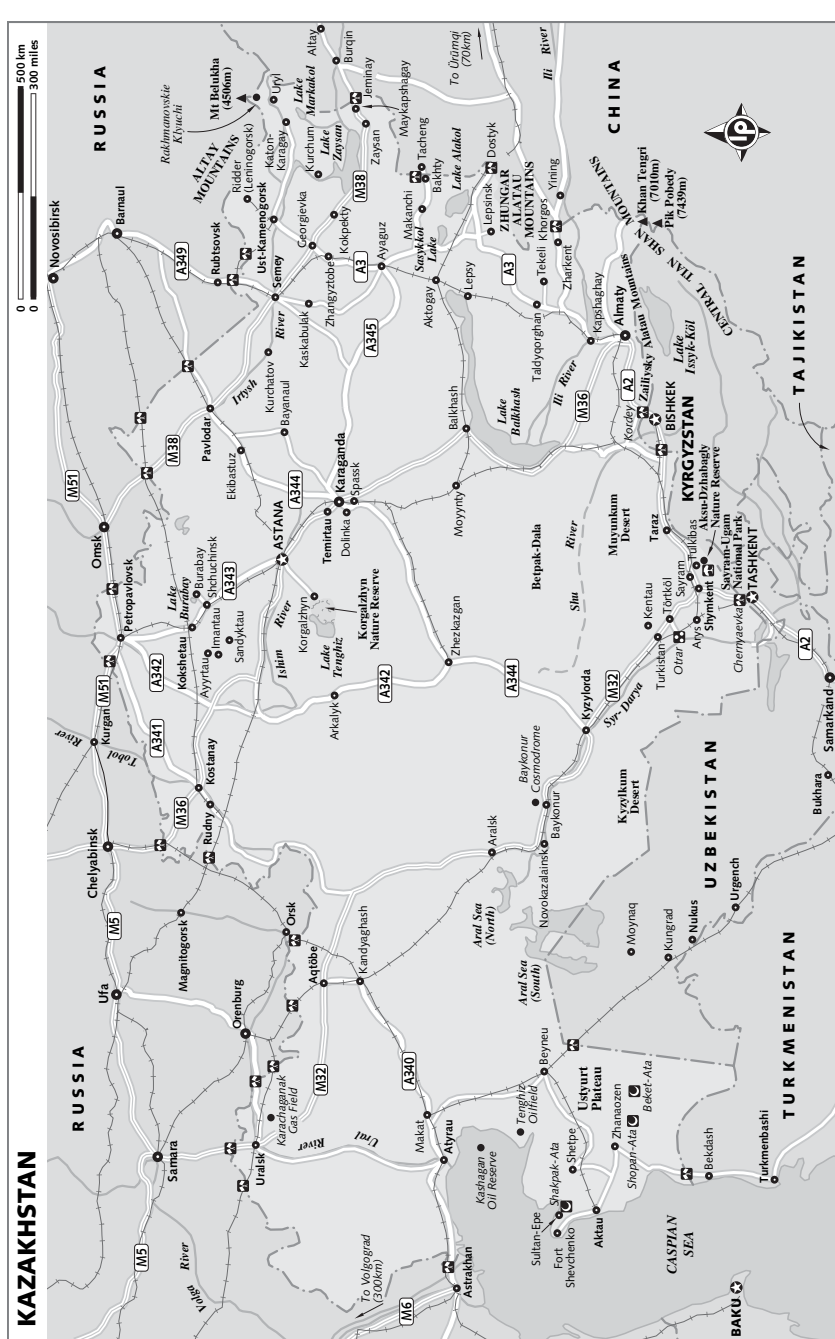
You can travel any time of year with the right preparation and logistics, but the most comfortable months are May to September. July, August and September are best for trekking in the southeastern and eastern mountains. See p446 for an Almaty climate chart.

HISTORY

The early history of Kazakhstan is a shadowy procession of nomadic empires, most of whom swept into the region from the east and left few records. Recurring themes down the millennia include a great deal of large-scale slaughter and a contrast between Kazakhstan's far south, which was within the ambit of the settled Silk Road civilisations of Transoxiana (between the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya rivers), and the rest of the country, which remained the domain of nomadic horseback animal herders until the 20th century.

Early Peoples

By around 500 BC southern Kazakhstan was inhabited by the Saka (Scythian), a nomadic people who are considered part of the vast network of Scythian cultures that stretched across the steppes from the Altay to Ukraine. The Saka left many burial mounds, in some of which fabulous relics have been found – above all, the Golden Man (see p119), a superb warrior's costume discovered near Almaty which has become a national symbol.



TRAVELLING SAFELY IN KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakhstan is a safe country to travel in, provided you maintain normal safety precautions (p447). The oil towns of Atyrau and Aktau have seen a few violent incidents and robberies.

Try to avoid the police, who are often only interested in foreigners as possible sources of bribes for minor 'infringements'.

The former nuclear testing area outside Semey, the Polygon, still has extreme levels of radiation in unmarked areas.

From 200 BC the Huns, followed by various Turkic peoples, migrated here from what are now Mongolia and northern China. The early Turks left totemlike carved stones known as *balbals*, bearing the images of honoured chiefs, at burial/worship/sacrifice sites. These can be seen in many museums in Kazakhstan today. From about AD 550 to 750 the southern half of Kazakhstan was the western extremity of the Kōk (Blue) Turk empire, which reached across the steppe from Manchuria.

The far south of Kazakhstan was within the sphere of the Bukhara-based Samanid dynasty from the mid-9th century and here cities such as Otrar and Yasy (now Turkistan) developed on the back of agriculture and Silk Road trade. When the Karakhanid Turks from the southern Kazakh steppe ousted the Samanids in the late 10th century, they took up the Samanids' settled ways (as well as Islam) and constructed some of Kazakhstan's earliest surviving buildings (in and around Taraz).

Jenghiz Khan

Around AD 1130 the Karakhanids were displaced by the Khitans, a Buddhist people driven out of Mongolia and northern China. The Central Asian state set up by the Khitans, known as the Karakitay empire, stretched from Xinjiang to Transoxiana but in the early 13th century it became prey to rising powers at both extremities. To the west was the Khorezmshah empire, based in Khorezm, south of the Aral Sea. In 1210 the Khorezmshah Mohammed II conquered Transoxiana.

To the east was Jenghiz Khan, who sent an army to crush the Karakitay in 1218, then turned to the Khorezmshah empire, which had misguidedly rebuffed his relatively peaceable overtures by murdering 450 of his mer-

chants at Otrar. The biggest Mongol army in history (150,000 or more) sacked Samarkand, Bukhara and Otrar, then carried on westwards to Europe and the Middle East. All of Kazakhstan, like the rest of Central Asia, became part of the Mongol empire.

On Jenghiz Khan's death in 1227, his enormous empire was divided between his sons. The lands most distant from the Mongol heartland – from the Aral Sea to Ukraine and Moscow – went to the descendants of his eldest son Jochi and came to be known as the Golden Horde. The bulk of Kazakhstan went to Jenghiz Khan's second son Chaghatai, and became known as the Chaghatai khanate. In the late 14th century far southern Kazakhstan was conquered by Timur from Samarkand.

The Kazakhs

The Kazakh people, descendants of the Mongols and of peoples who survived their conquest, did not emerge as a distinct group until the 15th century. The story actually starts with the Uzbeks, a group of Islamised Mongols named after a 14th-century leader Özbeg (Uzbek), who were left in control of northern Kazakhstan as the Golden Horde disintegrated in the 15th century.

In 1468 an internal feud split the Uzbeks into two groups. Those who ended up south of the Syr-Darya ruled from Bukhara as the Shaybanid dynasty and ultimately gave their name to modern Uzbekistan. Those who stayed north remained nomadic and became the Kazakhs, taking their name from a Turkic word meaning free rider, adventurer or outlaw.

In the late 15th and 16th centuries the Kazakhs established one of the last great nomadic empires, stretching across the steppe and desert north, east and west of the Syr-Darya. They even briefly ruled a chunk of Siberia from Sibir (modern Tobolsk) from 1563 to 1582.

The three Kazakh hordes that had emerged – with which Kazakhs today still identify – were the Great (or Elder) Horde in the south, the Middle Horde in the centre and northeast, and the Little (or Young or Lesser) Horde in the west. Each was ruled by a khan and composed of a number of clans whose leaders held the title *axial*, *bi* or *batyr*.

Despite their military prowess, the three clans failed to unite against danger, and were defeated first by the Zhungars (Oyrats), a

warlike Mongol clan who subjugated eastern Kazakhstan between 1690 and 1720 (the 'Great Disaster'), and later by the Russians.

The Russians Arrive

Russia's expansion across Siberia ran up against the Zhungars, against whom they built a line of forts along the Kazakhs' northern border. The Kazakhs sought tsarist protection from the Zhungars, and the khans of all three hordes swore loyalty to the Russian crown between 1731 and 1742. Russia later chose to interpret these oaths as agreements to annexation, and gradually extended its 'protection' of the khanates to their ultimate abolition. Despite repeated Kazakh uprisings, notably by Abylay Khan's grandson Tsarist Qasimov in the 1840s, Russia steadily tightened its grip.

The revolts were brutally suppressed. By some estimates one million of the four million Kazakhs died in revolts and famines before 1870. Meanwhile, movement of peasant settlers into Kazakhstan was stimulated by the abolition of serfdom in Russia and Ukraine in 1861. The tsarist regime also used Kazakhstan as a place of exile for dissidents – among them Fyodor Dostoevsky and the Ukrainian nationalist writer and artist Taras Shevchenko.

In 1916 Russian mobilisation of Kazakhs as support labour behind the WWI front caused a widespread uprising. It was brutally quashed, with an estimated 150,000 Kazakhs killed and perhaps 200,000 fleeing to China.

The Communist Takeover

In the chaos following the Russian Revolution of 1917, a Kazakh nationalist party, Alash Orda, tried to establish an independent government. Alash Orda's leader was Ali Khan Bukeykhanov, a prince and descendant of Jenghiz Khan, and ultimately a victim of Stalin's 1930s purges.

As the Russian civil war raged across Kazakhstan, Alash Orda eventually sided with the Bolsheviks who emerged victorious in 1920 – only for Alash members soon to be purged from the Communist Party of Kazakhstan (CPK). Meanwhile many thousands more Kazakhs and Russian peasants had died in the civil war, which devastated the land and economy, and several hundred thousand fled to China and elsewhere.

The next disaster to befall the Kazakhs was denomadisation, which began in the late 1920s. The world's biggest group of semi-

nomadic people was pushed one step up the Marxist evolutionary ladder to become settled farmers in new collectives. They slaughtered their herds rather than hand them over to state control and, unused to agriculture, died in their hundreds of thousands from famine and disease. Those who opposed collectivisation were sent to labour camps or killed. Kazakhstan's population fell by more than two million between 1926 and 1933.

'Development' & Unrest

In the 1930s and '40s more and more people from other parts of the USSR, prisoners and otherwise, were sent to work in new industrial towns and labour camps in Kazakhstan. Camp inmates included entire peoples deported en masse from western areas of the USSR around the time of WWII. A further wave of around 800,000 migrants arrived in the 1950s when Nikita Khrushchev decided to plough up 250,000 sq km of north Kazakhstan steppe to grow wheat in the Virgin Lands scheme (see p111).

Although the labour camps were wound down in the mid-1950s, many survivors stayed on. Yet more Russians, Ukrainians and other Soviet nationalities arrived to mine and process Kazakhstan's reserves of coal, iron and oil. The population of Kazakhs in Kazakhstan dwindled to less than 30%.

The CPK's leader from 1964 to 1986 was a Kazakh named Dinmukhamed Kunaev. Although he was corrupt, Kunaev's replacement by a Russian, Gennady Kolbin, in 1986 provoked big demonstrations and violent riots in many cities.

During the Cold War the USSR decided Kazakhstan was 'empty' and 'remote' enough to use for its chief nuclear bomb testing ground (the Semipalatinsk Polygon; see p111) and its space launch centre (the Baykonur Cosmodrome, see p150). In 1989 Kazakhstan produced the first great popular protest movement the USSR had seen: the Nevada-Semey (Semipalatinsk) Movement, which forced an end to nuclear tests in Kazakhstan.

Independence

Nursultan Nazarbaev, born into a rural Kazakh peasant family in 1940, began to rise up the CPK ranks in the 1970s. A protégé of Kunaev, he became first secretary (party leader) in 1989 and has ruled Kazakhstan ever since. In 1991 Nazarbaev did not welcome the break-up of

KAZAKHSTAN'S OIL

Kazakhstan's proven oil reserves are about 35 billion barrels, enough to supply the whole world for a year at current consumption rates. The government expects this figure to rise to more than 100 billion barrels by 2015, putting Kazakhstan in the world's top five nations for oil reserves. These riches are not only key to Kazakhstan's development but also a magnet to foreign governments and oil companies.

Tenghiz, southeast of Atyrau, is one of the world's 10 biggest oilfields, with reserves of at least six billion barrels and possibly 15 billion. It's being pumped by Tengizchevroil, a joint venture whose main partners are the Kazakhstan government and the US oil giant Chevron. Chevron's gamble in striking this deal way back in 1992, in the turbulent aftermath of the Soviet collapse, bought it some of the cheapest oil of modern times. The Kashagan field, 400m below the Caspian seabed, is three times as big as Tenghiz – it's the world's richest oil find since Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, in 1967, and is likely to come on stream in 2010 (Italy's Eni is the operator heading a multicompany international consortium).

Kazakh oil production in 2005 was 1.3 million barrels a day, making it one of the world's top 20 producers. This is scheduled to at least double (to about 3% of world consumption) by 2015.

Where Kazakh oil goes is a geopolitical issue. Most currently runs through pipelines into Russia, including a major pipe to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. Increasing amounts, however, now avoid Russia by being shipped across the Caspian to Baku (Azerbaijan), to feed into the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, opened in 2005, which takes oil to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. A new Kazakh oil port is being built at Kuryk, 76km south of Aktau, for trans-Caspian tankers. The first oil pipeline from Kazakhstan not to go through Russia was also inaugurated in 2005, from Atasu in central Kazakhstan to western China. This will eventually be linked to the Caspian oilfields, where oil-thirsty China has been buying up reserves.

Kazakhstan also has at least three trillion cubic metres of gas, of which 500 billion are in the Karachaganak field east of Aqtöbe. These figures are modest compared with neighbouring Russia and Turkmenistan, but a massive trans-Caspian gas pipeline is under discussion to feed Kazakh gas to Europe – something Russia is unhappy about since it would be bypassed. Kazakh gas production is due to rise from 25 billion cubic metres a year to 45 billion by 2105.

the USSR and Kazakhstan was the last Soviet republic to declare independence. He soon renounced the opportunity for Kazakhstan to become a nuclear power by transferring all 1410 Soviet nuclear warheads on Kazakh soil to Russia. Kazakhstan's first multiparty elections, in 1994, returned a parliament favourable to Nazarbaev, but were judged unfair by foreign observers. There were complaints of arbitrary barring of some candidates, ballot rigging and media distortion.

The parliament, however, turned out to be a thorn in Nazarbaev's side, obstructing his free-market economic reforms, which one deputy called 'shock surgery without anaesthetics'. Nazarbaev dissolved parliament in 1995 and soon afterwards won an overwhelming referendum majority to extend his presidential term until 2000. New parliamentary elections returned a new assembly favourable to Nazarbaev.

In 1997 Nazarbaev moved Kazakhstan's capital from Almaty to Astana, then a

medium-sized provincial city in the central north, citing Astana's more central location and greater proximity to Russia. He may also have wanted to mollify Kazakhstan's restive Russian population, concentrated in the north of the country. Despite incredulity at first, the new capital is there to stay and Astana is being transformed at great cost with impressive, sometimes spectacular, new buildings.

Nazarbaev's free-market economic policies won the support of Western governments and companies, some of which paid vast amounts to get a slice of Kazakhstan's large oil and gas reserves, mainly near and beneath the Caspian Sea. In 1999 Nazarbaev had a virtual walkover in new presidential elections after the main opposition leader, Akezhan Kazhegeldin, was barred from standing.

CURRENT EVENTS

Nazarbaev continues to rule Kazakhstan with an iron hand, but enjoys broad popularity as the country posts 9% to 10% economic growth

year after year and maintains broad ethnic harmony. He argues openly that democratic reform can only succeed on the back of economic progress. He won yet another seven-year presidential term with over 90% of the vote in the 2005 elections. International observers denounced the vote as unfair, as they have done every election held in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Nazarbaev's political rivals and critics are frequently sacked, jailed and even, in two cases in 2005 and 2006, found shot dead. (The government denied any involvement in the deaths.)

Even Nazarbaev's commitment to *eventual* democracy is under question: his eldest daughter Dariga Nazarbaeva, a powerful media owner and previously a mild critic of her father, merged her own political party, Asar, with his, Otan, in 2006. Nazarbaev is reckoned one of the world's richest men and his family circle is said to have at least a finger in every important enterprise in the country.

Many in the growing middle class want to see more genuine democracy and less corruption, and while the elite are unbelievably rich, by Nazarbaev's own admission almost 16% of the population still live below the poverty line. Rural migrants live in illegal settlements on the fringes of Almaty and Astana, and the country's health-care system is woefully antiquated.

Nazarbaev's long-term strategy for Kazakhstan is to use its natural-resource wealth to build a diversified, hi-tech economy by the year 2030. He sees Kazakhstan as 'a Central Asian snow leopard, creating a model to be followed by other developing countries'. He admires Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Margaret Thatcher, and has forged warm relationships with the main Western powers while remaining on good terms with Russia and China (also eager customers for Kazakh oil) and rubbing along OK with Kazakhstan's Central Asian neighbours.

Taking Norway's successful use of its North Sea oil as a model, Kazakhstan salts away some of its oil revenue in a national oil fund, worth US\$8 billion by 2005, which is designed to accumulate wealth for the future and reduce Kazakhstan's vulnerability to oil price swings. As the oil and gas are pumped ever faster it's not easy to see where Kazakhstan can go wrong, on the economic front at least.

With a vision of a trilingual populace speaking Kazakh, Russian and English by

2030, Nazarbaev is also considering a change from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

PEOPLE

Whereas rural Kazakhs have maintained some old traditions, particularly on display during festivals or weddings, most modern Kazakhs have mixed long enough with Slavs to make them seem almost European in their dress, work habits and home life. Their former nomadic lifestyle, however, has bequeathed a certain laid-back and open attitude which separates them from their Russian brethren.

Quality of life for most people in Kazakhstan has improved since the difficult years following independence. A middle class has emerged and in places such as Almaty and Astana their incomes are fuelling the opening of ever more leisure complexes, malls, car showrooms, nightclubs and restaurants.

While the rich, who earn salaries comparable to middle-income Europe, build themselves mansions up in the valleys around Almaty, home life for others hasn't changed much. Several generations of a family are still accustomed to living under one roof, with grandparents often caring for children while parents go to work. Kazakh homes tend to be decorated with colourful carpets and tapestries, a tradition inherited from brightly decked yurts.

In precommunist Kazakhstan, when most homes were one-room yurts, women occupied an important place in maintaining the home while husbands were out in the pastures, sometimes for extended periods. Islamic tendencies, however, gave ultimate domination to men. Following independence, economic depression forced many women to abandon careers in favour of less sophisticated jobs such as working in bazaars. Women occupy 20% of ministerial positions in the government.

Family and ancestry remain very important to Kazakhs. They determine both a person's *zhus* (horde) and clan. The best ancestor of all is Jenghiz Khan, and right up to the 20th century the Kazakh nobility consisted of those who could trace their lineage back to him.

Population

Southern areas are about 90% Kazakh; this figure declines the further north one travels; in many northern towns the majority population is Russian. An estimated 40% of people live in rural areas.

KAZAKHSTAN READING LIST

As Kazakhstan becomes more important to the Western world, more books in English are helping outsiders to understand the country.

- *Once in Kazakhstan: The Snow Leopard Emerges* by Keith Rosten (2004). Lively account of life in Kazakhstan against the backdrop of its current affairs and history.
- *Modern Clan Politics and Beyond: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan* by Edward Schatz (2005). Investigates the ongoing influence of the traditional Kazakh *zhus* (hordes).
- *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia* by Lutz Kleveman (2004). Very readable introduction to Caspian oil and its politics.
- *The Silent Steppe* by Mukhamet Shayakhmetov (published in English 2006). First-hand account of the horrors of collectivisation and WWII.
- *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* by Martha Brill Olcott (2002). Edgy commentary on independent Kazakhstan, heavily critical of its democratic failings.
- *The Kazakhs* by Martha Brill Olcott (1995). Authoritative tome of several hundred detailed pages that will keep you quiet for many a long evening on the steppe.

To understand Kazakh current affairs, keep a check on the **Roberts Report** (www.roberts-report.com) and **Eurasianet** (www.eurasianet.org).

About 56% of the 15 million population are Kazakhs – a big upward swing from Soviet times, aided by emigration of Russians, Germans and Ukrainians since independence and the arrival of hundreds of thousands of *oralman* (ethnic Kazakhs repatriating from other countries). The numbers of *oralman* are much higher than the government planned for and many have found themselves without decent housing or proper jobs. The total population is down by over two million since the early 1990s.

Other main ethnic groups are Russians (27%), Ukrainians and Uzbeks (3% each), and Germans, Tatars and Uyghurs (about 1.5% each). There are more than 100 other nationalities. Despite occasional incidents of unrest and some resentment among Russians over laws enshrining Kazakh as the country's official language, on the whole Kazakhstan's diverse ethnic groups rub along well with each other.

RELIGION

Kazakhstan as a nation has never been deeply religious and extremism is notable by its absence. Islam, the leading faith among Kazakhs, is at its strongest in the south, especially around Taraz, Shymkent and Turkistan. Pilgrimages to the mausoleum of Kozha Akhmed Yasau at Turkistan and the desert shrine of Beket-Ata, east of Aktau, are important ways

for Kazakh Muslims to affirm their faith. Most Muslims are of the Sunni denomination, while the Russian Orthodox Church is the major Christian denomination. The government trumpets Kazakhstan's tradition of religious tolerance.

ARTS

The new Kazakhstan is forging an identity based on old traditions, monuments and cultural icons. Some of the most inspiring symbols, such as the Scythian-style Golden Man costume (see p119) or the Kozha Akhmed Yasau Mausoleum (p149), were actually not Kazakh in origin but left on the territory by earlier inhabitants. Other elements, such as the writings of the national bard Abay Kunanbaev (1845–1904; see p173), or the riveting *aitys* (song duels) between skilled bards, are purely Kazakh.

The national musical instrument is the *dombra*, a small two-stringed lute with an oval box shape. Other instruments include the *qobyz* (a two-stringed primitive fiddle), the playing of which is said to have brought Jenghiz Khan to tears, and the *sybyzgy* (two flutes made of reed or wood strapped together like abbreviated pan pipes). The best place to catch Kazakh musical concerts is Almaty's State Philharmonia (see p126).

The music is largely folk tunes, handed down like the area's oral literature through

NOMAD

As Kazakhs continue to reassert their identity, the government invested almost US\$40 million in the Hollywood-style epic *Nomad* (*Koshpendiler* in Kazakh, *Kochevnik* in Russian), about 18th-century Kazakh resistance to the invading Hungarians and unification under Ablyay Khan. This all-action, lavishly filmed production was the most expensive Kazakh film ever made. An entire 18th-century town was built on the steppe near the Ili River, and the cast included Hollywood stars Jay Hernandez, Jason Scott Lee, Kuno Becker, Ron Yuan and Mark Dacascos. *Nomad* proved a big hit on release in Kazakhstan in 2006. Release in the West was pending at time of writing. The film was based on part of a celebrated historical novel of Kazakh nation-building, *Nomads*, by Ilyas Yesenberlin (1915–83).

the generations. The most skilled singers or bards are called *akyns*. Undoubtedly the most famous and important form of Kazakh art is the *aiys*, a duel between two *dombra* players who challenge each other in poetic lyrics. This may be seen during Nauryz (Navrus or 'New Days', the main Islamic spring festival on 22 March; see p179) and possibly other holidays, including 9 May (Victory Day) and 16 December (Independence Day). Meanwhile, Kazakh pop music is enjoying its greatest popularity, largely thanks to talent contests such as SuperStar KZ, the local version of Pop Idol. Stars like Madina Sadvaqasova, Roman Kim and Makpal Isabekova, who may sing in Russian, Kazakh or English, are all products of this trend.

As a nation of nomads, Kazakhs have little architectural or artistic tradition, but some of the new buildings going up in Astana display a uniquely Kazakhstani mix of Asian, Western and Russian styles – undeniably spectacular in some cases – and beautiful new mosques have been built in Pavlodar, Almaty and Astana.

High skills were developed in the crafts associated with nomadic life, such as brightly woven carpets and wall-hangings for yurts, jewellery, ornate horse tackle and weaponry, and splendid costumes for special occasions. You can admire these in almost any museum in the country.

ENVIRONMENT**The Land**

Except for strings of mountains along its southern and eastern borders, Kazakhstan is almost as flat as a pancake. At 2.7 million sq km, it's the ninth-biggest country in the world, about the size of Western Europe. It borders Russia to the north, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the south, and China in the east. It has lengthy shorelines on

the Caspian Sea (1894km) and on the Aral Sea, which it shares with Uzbekistan.

Southeast Kazakhstan lies along the northern edge of the Tian Shan; Mt Khan Tengri (7010m) pegs the China–Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border. Kazakhstan's eastern border, shared with China, is a series of mountain ranges culminating in the Altay where some peaks top 4000m.

The north of the country is flat, mostly treeless steppe, as much akin to Siberia as to Central Asia, with much of its original grassland now turned over to wheat or other agriculture. Further south and west the steppe is increasingly arid, becoming desert or semidesert. A surprising number of lakes break up the steppe, especially in the north.

The most important rivers are the Syr-Darya, flowing across the south of Kazakhstan to the Little Aral Sea; the Ural, flowing from Russia into the Caspian Sea; the Ili, flowing out of China into Lake Balkhash; and the Irtysh, which flows across northeast Kazakhstan into Siberia. Lake Balkhash in the central east is the fourth-largest lake in Asia (17,400 sq km) but very shallow – only 26m at its deepest point.

Wildlife

Kazakhstan's mountains are rich in wildlife, including bear, lynx, argali sheep, ibex, wolves, wild boar, several types of deer, the goitred gazelle (known locally as the zheyran), and the elusive snow leopard, of which about 30 remain in the Altay, the mountains south of Almaty and the Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve. The saiga antelope population has been reduced from two million to 40,000 in 20 years, chiefly by poaching: its horns are considered an aphrodisiac in China. The saiga survives in Kazakhstan only in the Betpak-Dala desert west of Lake Balkhash and in an area near Uralsk. The antlers of the large

maral deer are also believed to have aphrodisiac properties and the animal is farmed for this reason in the Altay. In the Altyn-Emel National Park, Przewalski's horses, extinct in Kazakhstan since 1940, have been reintroduced from zoos in Europe.

The golden eagle on Kazakhstan's flag is a good omen for ornithologists. Hundreds of bird species are to be seen, from the paradise flycatcher of Aksu-Dzhabagly to the Himalayan snowcock and the relict gulls of Lake Alakol. More spectacular to the casual traveller are the thousands of flamingos which spend summer at Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve, 150km southwest of Astana. See www.kazakhstanbirdtours.com for good bird background.

Environmental Issues

Because of its vast size and relative emptiness, Kazakhstan, more than any other Central Asian country, was forced to endure the worst excesses of the Soviet system – a fearful legacy it is still grappling with. The Aral Sea catastrophe (p151) is well known, but the country also continues to suffer from the fallout, both literal and metaphorical, of Soviet nuclear tests conducted mainly near Semey in eastern Kazakhstan. The Caspian Sea is another environmental flashpoint, as oil and gas exploitation has an increasing impact. Industrial air pollution, especially from metallurgical plants, is still bad in cities such as Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Ekibastuz and Kostanay.

NUCLEAR TESTS

During the Cold War, far from both Moscow and the eyes of the West, some 460 nuclear tests were carried out at the Polygon, as the testing ground near Semey was known. Although looking empty on the map, the region around the Polygon certainly wasn't uninhabited: villagers living close by were given virtually no protection or warning of the dangers.

The end for the Polygon came about as a result of the Nevada-Semey Movement, a popular protest launched in the wake of two particular tests in 1989. Within a few days more than a million signatures had been collected on Kazakhstan's streets calling for an end to the tests. The Communist Party of Kazakhstan called for the closure of the Polygon, and President Nazarbaev closed the site in

1991 after the collapse of the USSR, announcing compensation for the victims. The tragic effects linger, however: genetic mutations, cancers, weakened immune systems and mental illness continue to destroy lives and occupy hospitals and clinics in and around Semey, and may do so for generations to come. The website of Kazakhstan's embassy in the USA (www.kazakhembus.com) issues a heartfelt plea for assistance and an appeal on behalf of the Semey Oncology Centre where cancers are treated. The UN Development Programme says the number of irradiated people in the area has reached half a million. According to the Karaganda Ecological Museum, there is a shortfall of about US\$100 million in compensation payments.

THE VIRGIN LANDS CAMPAIGN

In 1954 under Khrushchev, the Soviet government undertook to expand arable land on a massive scale by irrigating the steppes and deserts of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The water was to come via canals from the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya, and certain Siberian rivers would be tapped or even reversed.

The Siberian part was dropped but the rest went ahead with great fanfare. Only under *glasnost* (openness) did the downside become clear. In some areas of the Kazakh steppe, soil has become degraded or is so over-fertilised that local rivers and lands are seriously polluted. By some measures, the problems of erosion, aridity and salinity are on a larger scale than those associated with the Aral Sea (p77). One UN report estimates that the country has lost 1.2 billion tonnes of topsoil.

THE CASPIAN SEA

As the Kashagan underwater oilfield is being prepared for exploitation, and other fields around the Caspian are already being pumped, the environmental future of the world's largest lake hangs in the balance.

An estimated 2000 sq km of land has been contaminated by oil accidents, spills and leak, and flaring-off of unwanted gas has caused air pollution and health problems in the area of the Tenghiz oilfield.

Signs of trouble are also visible among the sea's 415 species of fish, including the famous beluga (white) sturgeon, source of the world's best caviar. A beluga can grow 6m in length and the 100kg of caviar that it might yield can sell for a quarter of a million dollars. The

ECOTOURISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

Ecotourism is still finding its feet in Kazakhstan, but, with the country's great wealth of varied natural attractions, it surely has a bright future. Your first stop should be the Ecotourism Information Resource Centre (EIRC) in Almaty (see p117) – it's a good idea to look at its website when you're planning your Kazakhstan trip. The helpful, English-speaking EIRC is the focal point for community-based ecotourism in Kazakhstan, providing travellers with information, bookings and organisational help for visiting half-a-dozen ecotourism programmes around the country.

These programmes, situated in some of the country's most attractive natural areas, offer welcoming homestays with local families, guided hikes, treks and horse rides, and a variety of other activities from bird-, animal- and plant-spotting to concerts of traditional Kazakh music and even *kumys*-making sessions. At some sites you can spend your nights in yurts. Average homestay prices are US\$25 to US\$30 per person per night including three meals – pretty good value. You'll typically spend about the same again on guides, park fees, horses, vehicle transfers and other expenses.

Top sites:

Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve (p146) Beautiful mountain country at the northwest extremity of the Tian Shan, with high biodiversity.

Sayram-Ugam National Park (p147) Near Aksu-Dzhabagly, with similar attractions.

Lepsinsk (p139) Quaint village at the foot of Zhungar Alatau mountains: great hikes and rides.

Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve (p165) Steppe lakes and exciting bird-watching; the world's most northerly flamingo habitat.

Kokshetau (p166) Village life, walks and rides amid unspoiled northern countryside with lakes, woodlands and rocky hills.

Some sites including Lepsinsk are in border zones which require a special permit that can take a month or more to get. Plan ahead!

Caspian is the source of 90% of the world's caviar, yet catches of all types of sturgeon have dropped dramatically since 1990, as overharvesting, water pollution and poaching all take their toll. Caviar yields for Kazakh fishing boats have dwindled to almost nothing. There's also concern for the endemic Caspian seal: outbreaks of disease and death among the seal population in recent years have been blamed partly on sea pollution.

FOOD & DRINK

The food culture of Kazakhstan is one of the strongest indications of the Kazakhs' nomadic roots. Nomads eat the food most readily available, and in most cases this meant horses and sheep. Across the country you'll also find ubiquitous Central Asian dishes such as *shashlyk*, *laghman* (noodles), *manty* (steamed dumplings) and *plov* (Central Asian pilaf of rice and mixed vegetables). In the main cities and northern Kazakhstan, Russian cuisine is prevalent, reflecting the tastes of the immigrant culture – and today is supplemented by an international range of restaurants ranging

from Italian and Tex-Mex to Chinese and Korean.

The Kazakh national dish is *besbarmak*, chunks of long-boiled beef, mutton or perhaps horse meat and onions, served in a huge bowl atop flat squares of pasta. The broth from the meat is drunk separately.

In bazaars and a few restaurants, it is likely that you'll come across *kazy* (a smoked horse-meat sausage, though beef is sometimes substituted); when served on special occasions sliced with cold noodles it is called *naryn*. *Karta* (literally 'horse intestines', which is used as the casing) and *chuchuk* are two other kinds of horse-meat sausage. *Kuurdak* is a fatty stew of meat, offal (including lungs and heart) and potato, boiled in a pot for two to three hours.

Kazakhs make a sweet *plov* with dried apricots, raisins and prunes, while *plov askabak* is made with pumpkin. *Zhuta* is pasta shaped like a Swiss roll with a carrot and pumpkin filling.

A local snack is *baursaki*, fried dough balls or triangles, not unlike heavy doughnuts. Ka-

zakh apples are also famous in Central Asia (Almaty and its old name, Alma-Ata, literally mean 'father of apples').

As in Kyrgyzstan, *kumys* (fermented mare's milk) is popular. On the steppes and in the desert regions, you'll even come across *shubat* (fermented camel's milk) which has a somewhat less salty taste.

Most midrange and top-end restaurants add a 10% service charge to the bill, and most main dishes on menus do not include any 'garnish' such as potatoes, rice or vegetables. If main dishes cost between 400T and 700T, a full meal with a salad, bread, garnish, dessert, a couple of drinks and service charge can easily add up to 2000T.

One way to eat economically is to go for the 'business lunch' (*biznes lunch*, *kompleksny obed*) offered by many city restaurants. This is a good-value set meal, typically comprising soup or salad, a main course, a dessert and a drink.

ALMATY АЛМАТЫ

📍 327 / pop 1.3 million

Kazakhstan's economic prosperity is most palpable here in its biggest city, where at times you could almost believe you are in Europe, such are the numbers of glitzy international shops lining the streets and of Mercedes, Audis, Volkswagens and BMWs negotiating the peak-hour jams. This leafy city with a backdrop of the snow-capped Zailiysky Alatau (a spur of the Tian Shan) has always been one of the most charming Russian creations in Central Asia. Today Almaty's fast-growing middle class also have expensive suburban housing, well-stocked 24-hour supermarkets, Western-style coffee lounges, fine restaurants, chic bars, dance-till-dawn nightclubs and even new ski resorts to help them enjoy life to the full.

The ethnic Kazakh presence is gradually getting stronger in what was always a heavily Russian-influenced city, but everyone seems to rub along fine. No-one even seems too bothered that Astana has replaced Almaty as Kazakhstan's capital – except those who have had to move to Astana.

Almaty is Kazakhstan's main transport hub and a place many travellers pass through rather than linger, but if you do stay a few days you'll find – as several thousand Western expats have – that Almaty is a place for

enjoying many green parks and colourfully illuminated fountains, for visiting excellent museums, theatres, shops and markets, and for eating, drinking and dancing in Central Asia's best selection of restaurants, bars and clubs. It's also a starting point for great hikes, drives, treks and skiing in the Zailiysky Alatau between here and Kyrgyzstan (the border is just 25km south) and it's the obvious jump-off point for the magnificent central Tian Shan in Kazakhstan's far southeastern corner.

The best times to visit Almaty are mid-April to late May, and mid-August to mid-October, when it's neither too cold nor too hot.

HISTORY

Almaty was founded in 1854, when the Kazakhs were still nomads, as a Russian frontier fort named Verny on the site of the Silk Road oasis Almatu which had been laid waste by the Mongols. Cossacks and Siberian peasants settled around it, but the town was twice almost flattened by earthquakes, in 1887 and 1911. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries it was a place of exile, its best-known outcast being Leon Trotsky.

Renamed Alma-Ata (Father of Apples), it became the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan in 1927, and was connected to Siberia by the Turksib (Turkestan–Siberia) railway in 1930. The railway brought big growth and so did WWII, as factories were relocated here from Nazi-threatened western USSR, and many Slavs came to work in them. Large numbers of ethnic Koreans, forcibly resettled from the Russian Far East, arrived at the same time.

In the 1970s and early '80s Kazakhstan's leader Dinmukhamed Kunaev, the only Central Asian member of the Soviet Politburo, managed to steer lots of money southeast from

ALMATY MUST-SEES

Kök-Töbe cable car Smooth ride to the best views in town (p120).

Central State Museum All Kazakhstan's history under one roof (p119).

Chimbulak Fresh powder snow a 40-minute drive from your door (p130).

Abay State Opera & Ballet Theatre High-quality theatre at a bucket shop price (p125).

Barakholka This market is a vast melange of junk and gems (p127).



Moscow to transform Alma-Ata from a provincial town into a worthy capital of a Soviet republic. Hence the number of buildings in relatively adventurous late-Soviet styles such as the Arasan Baths and Hotel Kazakhstan, and the stately piles such as the Academy of Sciences and the old parliament, now the Kazakh-British Technical University.

Almaty saw the first unrest unleashed in Central Asia by the Gorbachev era of *glasnost*. Thousands took to the streets in December 1986 to protest against Kunaev's replacement as head of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan by the Russian Gennady Kolbin. A counterdemo of workers armed with metal bars turned the protest into riots,

INFORMATION		Geology Museum.....	44 D4	DRINKING ☑	
ACS.....	1 D6	Kazakhstan Museum of Arts.....	45 A5	Dublin Pub.....	94 C5
Akademkitap No 1.....	2 C3	Monument to Independence.....	46 C5	Guinness Pub.....	95 D4
Akademkitap No 2.....	3 C4	Museum of Kazakh Musical Instruments.....	47 D3	Mad Murphy's.....	96 D3
Alai.....	4 C3	Presidential Residence.....	48 C5	San Siro.....	97 C3
Asia Discovery.....	5 B5	Rakhhat Fitness.....	49 A5	Shtab.....	98 C4
Australian Consulate.....	6 D6	St Nicholas Cathedral.....	50 B4	Soho.....	99 C3
British Council.....	7 C5	War Memorial.....	51 D3	Tinkoff.....	100 B5
Cafemax.....	8 C2	Canadian Embassy.....	52 C3	Vogue.....	101 C5
Cafemax.....	9 C5	SLEEPING ☑			
Central Asia Tourism Corporation.....	10 D3	Gostinitsa.....	53 B1	ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
Central Post Office.....	11 D3	Hotel Almaty.....	54 C4	Abay State Opera & Ballet Theatre.....	102 C4
Chinese Embassy Office.....	12 C3	Hotel Ambassador.....	55 B4	Auezov Kazakh Drama Theatre.....	103 A5
Coffeedelia..... (see 72)		Hotel Kazakhstan.....	56 D4	Central Stadium.....	104 B5
DHL.....	13 D4	Hotel Kazzhol.....	57 B3	Crystal.....	105 B6
Ecotourism Information Resource Centre.....	14 A5	Hotel Otrar.....	58 C3	Cuba.....	106 D3
French Embassy.....	15 B3	Hotel Saulet.....	59 C5	Da Freak.....	107 D3
German Embassy..... (see 16)		Hotel Transitz.....	60 B2	Gas..... (see 112)	
Global Air.....	16 C4	Hotel Turkistan.....	61 C2	Kazkontsert Hall.....	108 C3
Goethe Institute.....	17 C3	Hotel Tyan-Shan.....	62 C4	Kinoteatr Tsezar.....	109 C3
Hotel Otrar 1..... (see 58)		Hotel Uyut.....	63 B3	Members Bar..... (see 66)	
Hotel Otrar 2..... (see 58)		Hotel Zhetisu.....	64 B2	Mostafterpartyclub.....	110 B2
InterContinental Almaty.....	18 A5	Hyatt Regency Almaty.....	65 A5	Nice Bar..... (see 105)	
International SOS.....	19 D5	InterContinental Almaty.....	66 C5	Palace of the Republic.....	111 D4
Intertech.....	20 B3	Saya Hotel.....	67 C4	Petroleum.....	112 B4
Iranian Embassy.....	21 D5	Third Dormitory.....	68 D5	Real Club.....	113 B2
Japanese Embassy Office.....	22 D3	Jibek Joly..... (see 64)		State Philharmonia.....	114 D3
Kazkommertbank.....	23 C5	EATING ☑		Stereo.....	115 B5
Kyrgyz Consulate.....	24 D5	American Bar & Grill.....	70 C3	SHOPPING ☑	
Migration Police.....	25 A4	Biskvit.....	71 D4	Megasport.....	116 C2
Netherlands Embassy.....	26 B4	Coffeedelia.....	72 C4	Meloman.....	117 C3
Pakistani Embassy.....	27 C2	Dastarkhan.....	73 B4	Ramstor1..... (see 82)	
Qazaqtelekom.....	28 C3	Inara.....	74 D3	Republican Palace of Schoolchildren.....	118 D5
Qazaqtelekom.....	29 C4	Kafe Keruen.....	75 C3	Silk Way City..... (see 87)	
Russian Consulate.....	30 A5	Kishlak.....	76 B5	Sport Land.....	119 B3
Silk Way City..... (see 87)		Mad Murphy's..... (see 96)		Tengri Umai.....	120 C3
Stalker.....	31 D3	Mama Mia.....	77 C3	TsUM.....	121 C3
Troy Internet Café.....	32 C3	Namaste.....	78 B5	TRANSPORT	
Uzbek Embassy.....	36 D3	Pomodoro Caffé.....	79 C3	Air Astana..... (see 58)	
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Printsessa Turandot.....	80 A5	Asiana Airlines..... (see 58)	
Almaty City History Museum & Museum of Repression... 37 B4		Qorqyt Ata.....	81 C3	British Airways.....	122 D4
Arasan Baths.....	38 C3	Ramstor.....	82 D5	Europcar.....	123 C4
Central (Gorky) Park (Main Entrance).....	39 D2	Restoran Printsessa.....	83 C3	Georgian National Airlines..... (see 125)	
Central State Museum.....	40 C5	Safran.....	84 D3	Gorodskoy Aerovokzal.....	124 B3
City Government Building.....	41 C5	Shi Bon Kha.....	85 C3	Imair.....	125 B3
Dinamo Stadium.....	42 B4	Shvabsky Domik.....	86 C4	KLM..... (see 58)	
Fantasy World.....	43 A5	Silk Way City Gipermarket.....	87 B3	Kras Air..... (see 44)	
		SM Market.....	88 C2	Lufthansa..... (see 65)	
		Stolichny.....	89 C4	Pulkovo Airline.....	126 C2
		Thai.....	90 D4	Saykhat Bus Station.....	127 C2
		Traktir Zhili-Byli.....	91 C4	Transero.....	128 C2
		Yubileyny.....	92 C3	Turkish Airlines.....	129 C3
		Zheti Qazyna.....	93 C2	Uzbekistan Airlines.....	130 C3

police opened fire and possibly as many as 250 people were killed.

In 1991 Almaty was the venue for the meeting at which the USSR was finally pronounced dead, when all five Central Asian republics, plus Azerbaijan, Armenia and Moldova, joined the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), founded by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The name Almaty, close to that of the original Silk Road settlement, replaced Alma-Ata soon after.

Almaty lost its status as Kazakhstan's capital in 1998 but remains the country's commercial, social and cultural hub. In an ongoing property boom, ever more office towers, apartment blocks and shopping centres are pushing skyward, especially in the south of the city. The tarnished side of this shiny middle-class coin is represented by the shabby settlements of rural migrants and Kazakh returnees on the city's outskirts.

ORIENTATION

Some find Almaty's long, straight streets easy to navigate once you get to know the key north-south and east-west arteries; others find a lack of landmarks confusing. Keep in mind that the mountains are to the south, and the city slopes upward from north (650m) to south (950m).

Posted street names are generally Kazakh spellings but local people are often equally familiar with the old Soviet names, so you'll find the most important of these given in brackets on the Almaty map.

The airport is 13km north of the centre and the Sayran long-distance bus station is 5km west. The main train station, Almaty-II, and the Saykhat regional bus station are on the northern edge of the central area.

In the centre, the main north-south streets are Dostyq (Lenina), Qonaev (Karl Marx), Furmanov, Abylay Khan (Kommunisticheskyy) and Seyfullin. The key east-west streets are Zhibek Zholy (Gorkogo; partly pedestrianised), Gogol, Töle Bi, Abay and Satpaev.

Maps

An unpredictable selection of city maps in English and Russian is available for a few hundred tenge each at hotels and the Akademkitap bookshops (right). For public transport routes, get *Almaty Marshrutyy Gorodskogo Transporta*, in Russian.

For topographical maps of parts of Kazakhstan, head to GEO (below). Akademkitap has some Almaty-area hiking maps.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Akademkitap (☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun) No 1 (☎ 273 78 18; Furmanov 91) No 2 (☎ 272 79 81; Furmanov 139) Has a range of dictionaries, phrasebooks, books; No 1 is good for city and hiking maps.

GEO (☎ 243 75 88; Satpaev 30B; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) Sells topographical maps of regions of Kazakhstan published at various times from the 1970s onwards; 1:200,000 maps are 700T, 1:500,000 are 800T.

Hotel Otrav (☎ 250 68 48; Gogol 73) The newsstand here has a good map selection.

InterContinental Almaty (☎ 250 50 00; Zheltoqsan 181) Has a reasonably well-stocked bookshop.

Cultural Centres

British Council (☎ 250 66 48; www.britishcouncil.kz; Respublika alanghy 13; ☎ library noon-7pm Mon-Thu, 10am-4pm Fri & Sat) Organises exhibitions, concerts, dance and drama performances, and has an English library with internet (per hr 400T, British sites free).

Goethe Institute (☎ 247 27 04; www.goethe.de/almaty; Zhandosov 2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, library 1-6.15pm Mon-Thu, 10am-2pm Fri)

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 03)

Fire service (☎ 01)

Police (☎ 02)

Internet Access

Internet cafés generally offer much better prices than hotel business centres.

Cafemax Silk Way (☎ 273 95 53; 2nd fl, Silk Way Mall, Zhibek Zholy 70; per hr 350T; ☎ 10am-9pm); Timiryazev (☎ 260 99 99; Timiryazev 1A; per hr 350T; ☎ 24hr) Bright, modern facilities with fast connections on lots of computers, and good cafés on the spot. Also copies CDs, sends faxes and makes photocopies.

Coffeodelia (☎ 272 64 09; Qabanbay Batyr 79; ☎ 8am-midnight Mon-Thu, 8am-1am Fri, 9am-1am Sat, 9am-midnight Sun) Free wi-fi at this great coffee house (see p123).

Qazaqtelekom (☎ 233 11 50; Zhibek Zholy 100; per hr 122T; ☎ 8am-10pm) Cheap net in a phone office.

Silk Way City (Töle Bi 71; per hr 300T; ☎ 24hr) Good facility upstairs in this mall.

Stalker (☎ 291 20 46; Töle Bi 20; per hr 300T; ☎ 11am-1am Mon-Thu, 11am-2am Fri, 11am-1pm Sat &

Sun) Slow connections but there's a cosy café-bar on the premises.

Troy Internet Café (Zhibek Zholy 68; per hr 250T; ☎ 10am-1am) Medium-speed connections and convenient location next to Silk Way Mall.

Laundry

Many hotels will do your laundry but it will take at least 24 hours.

Trus, Balbes, Byvaly (☎ 261 66 38; Qabanbay Batyr 96; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat) Charges 200T to 400T per shirt, T-shirt or trousers, ironing included. Normal service is 24 hours.

Medical Services

Pharmacies (Kazakh: *darikhana*, Russian: *apteka*) all over Almaty sell many Western medicines.

Alai (nr Furmanov & Gogol; ☎ 24hr) This pharmacy never closes.

International SOS (☎ 258 19 11; www.international.sos.com; Lugansky 11; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) International-standard clinic with 24-hour emergency service; very expensive for nonmembers.

Interteach (☎/fax 258 81 00; www.interteach.kz; Ayteke Bi 83; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat & Sun, ambulance 24hr) Private polyclinic charging €17 for a normal consultation, €52 for an ambulance. Also does remote-area medical assistance.

Money

There are exchange kiosks on all main streets. Avoid kiosks in other very public places, such as the Zelyony Bazar (Green Market), to minimise the risk of theft.

An ATM is never too far away: look for 'Bankomat' signs. All shopping malls, the TsUM department store, most banks and some supermarkets and smaller shops have them. To change travellers cheques look for branches of Kazkommertsbank or Halyk Bank (there are many all over the city).

Global Air (☎ 258 50 59; www.globalair-kz.com; Qonaev 85) The Amex agent.

Kazkommertsbank (☎ 258 51 23; Bayseyitova 49; www.kkb.kz; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3.30pm Sat) This bank's main branch.

Post

Central post office (Bögenbay Batyr 134; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun)

DHL (☎ 258 85 88; Zhandosov 1/1; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat)

FedEx (☎ 250 35 66; Tölebaev 38; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

Registration

Migration Police (☎ 254 41 45; Baytursynuly; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Wed & Fri) If for some reason you have missed out on registration when you entered the country, try here. Located between Bögenbay Batyr and Karasay Batyr.

Telephone & Fax

Card payphones are located all over the city. See p180 for how to operate them.

Qazaqtelekom Panfilov (☎ 297 56 03; Panfilov 129; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat); Zhibek Zholy (☎ 233 11 50; Zhibek Zholy 100; ☎ 8am-10pm) You can phone from these offices. The Panfilov branch has fax and photocopying too, and there's cheap internet at the Zhibek Zholy branch.

Tourist Information

Ecotourism Information Resource Centre (EIRC; ☎ 278 02 89, 278 81 46; www.ecotourism.kz; Zheltoqsan 71; ☎ 10am-7pm daily May-Sep, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Helpful, English-speaking, information and booking centre for community ecotourism programmes in Kazakhstan (p112); can help with travel arrangements to ecotourism villages and also offers weekend day trips by bus to places of interest outside Almaty (with Russian-speaking guides) for around 1100T to 1500T per person.

Travel Agencies

There are a number of general travel agencies useful for air and train tickets, hotel bookings, visa support, day and two-day outings to places of interest within reach of Almaty, and longer tours.

ACS (☎ 264 49 49; www.polet.kz; Dom 63, Mikrorayon Samal-2) English-speaking staff. Excursions to Uzbekistan offered. Has other offices in Astana and Aktau.

Central Asia Tourism Corporation (CATC; ☎ 250 10 70; www.centralasiatourism.com; Qazybek Bi 20½; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Very experienced agency with branches in eight other Kazakhstan cities plus Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Staff speak several European languages. Services include ticketing for trains and all airlines flying in and from Kazakhstan, visa arrangements (including for other Central Asian countries), tours and accommodation. Day trips from Almaty cost around 35,000T to 40,000T for up to seven people.

Jibek Joly (☎ 250 04 15; www.jibekjoly.kz; Hotel Zhetisu, Abylay Khan 55) Offers tours, accommodation in and around Almaty, visa support and ISIC cards (900T).

Stantours (☎ 297 70 72, 705-1184619; www.stantours.com) Low-key operation with excellent personal service; offers reliable free advice on Central Asia travel and is a specialist in visas for the whole region. Also provides air and train tickets, and can book accommodation and

tours throughout Central Asia, including Turkmenistan tours and active tours to offbeat locations. Prices are reasonable. Contact Stantours by email (info@stantours.com) or phone.

Turan-Asia (☎ 273 46 21; www.turanasia.kz; Office 8, Abylay Khan 66) Accommodation, visa support, ticketing and tours.

The following agencies specialise in mountaineering, trekking and active tours, but can usually also organise visa support and accommodation:

Kan Tengri (☎ 291 60 06, 291 08 80; www.kantengri.kz; Kasteev 10) Kazakhstan's top adventure-travel company, highly experienced and respected in mountain tourism. Kan Tengri focuses on climbs, trekking and heli-skiing in the central Tian Shan (including Mt Khan Tengri) and the ranges between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl. Also offers horse treks, mountain biking, sport fishing, bird-watching and botanical tours. Most trips last between one and three weeks. A two-week trekking tour typically costs around €1000 per person from Almaty. Small groups, including solo travellers, can be catered for. The company's director is Kazbek Valiev, the first Kazakh to scale Mt Everest.

Tour Asia (☎ 248 25 73; www.tourasia.kz; Radostovets 359) This long-established company offers trekking and mountaineering in the central Tian Shan, the mountains south of Almaty and the Pamirs, plus ticketing, accommodation and visa support. Located 6km south from the centre.

Asia Discovery (☎ 260 13 93; www.asia-discovery.nursat.kz; Abay 61) Experienced agency offering treks, horse-riding, rafting and bird-watching tours lasting one to two weeks for €400 to €1100.

Karlygash (Karla) Makatova (☎ 273 21 09, 271 26 17, 701-7552086; kmakatova@yahoo.com) Independent one-woman operator who has long organised trips for the expat community and offers day hikes, treks and climbs from one day up, drives, kayaking, helicopter flights, night-time tours of Almaty's fountains and more. Her trips are spirited, not too expensive, and a good way to meet locals and expats. Karlygash has no office: contact her by email or phone.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Almaty is a pretty safe town, but you should still exercise the usual precautions (see p447). The commonest emergencies for Westerners here concern late-night activities – people robbed in taxis after emerging inebriated from bars and nightclubs, or passports and money stolen by prostitutes.

Though police harassment is less common these days, it can still happen. It's best not to carry much cash around, and you certainly

wouldn't want to let your wallet into police hands. If you are stopped on the street, show only a photocopy of your passport and visa (preferably one certified by your embassy or consulate; see p182). Writing down a name and badge number helps keep police honest (and may unmask impostors).

Scams

One thing you do have to be wary of is the 'Wallet Full of Dollars' scam. Someone finds a wallet lying on the ground as you pass, opens it and finds hundreds of dollars inside. They draw your attention to it and if you stop, it becomes clear there's nothing in the wallet to identify its owner. The person offers to share the loot with you and if you start to get involved, another person appears, claiming the wallet is theirs and that it originally contained much more money. They demand compensation or threaten to take you to the police, in the hope of intimidating you into making them a payment. Another less subtle ruse is for people to say they have lost their wallet and ask to see the contents of your pockets or bag to prove that you don't have it. This is an opportunity for them to filch your valuables.

To avoid trouble, ignore anyone who 'finds' or 'loses' a wallet, and keep walking without hesitation.

There have also been reports of drivers from the airport taking new arrivals to the Almaty outskirts and threatening to strand them. Only large sums of money could persuade them otherwise. To avoid complications, jot down your vehicle's licence number, give the exact address of the place you want to go, and try not to let on that you are an Almaty novice.

Be wary of accepting invitations to stay with strangers. One traveller's 'hosts' demanded a large amount of money to let her leave with her luggage.

SIGHTS Panfilov Park

Located between Gogol and Qazybek Bi, this large and popular rectangle of greenery, first laid out in the 1870s, is focused on the candy-coloured **Zenkov Cathedral**, Almaty's nearest (albeit distant) rival to St Basil's Cathedral. Designed by AP Zenkov in 1904, the cathedral is one of Almaty's few surviving tsarist-era buildings (most of the others were destroyed in the 1911 earthquake). Although at first glance it doesn't look like it, the cathedral is

built entirely of wood (including the nails). Used as a museum and concert hall in the Soviet era, then boarded up, it was returned to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1995 and has been restored as a functioning place of worship, with colourful icons and murals. Services are held at 8am and 5pm Monday to Saturday, and 7am, 9am and 5pm Sunday.

The park is named for the Panfilov Heroes, commemorated at the fearsome **war memorial** east of the cathedral. This represents the 28 soldiers of an Almaty infantry unit who died fighting off Nazi tanks in a village outside Moscow in 1941. An eternal flame commemorating the fallen of 1917–20 (the Civil War) and 1941–45 (WWII), flickers in front of the giant black monument of soldiers from all 15 Soviet republics bursting out of a map of the USSR.

The park is on the routes of trolleybus 1, 11 and 12, tram 4 and 6, and bus 63 and 94, among others.

Central (Gorky) Park

Almaty's biggest **recreational area** (admission 25T; ☎ 24 hr), at the eastern end of Gogol, is still known as Gorky Park. It has boating lakes, funfair rides, an **Aquapark** (adult/child 2000/1500T; ☎ noon-10pm Jun-Sep), a rather sad **zoo** (adult/child 300/50T; ☎ 9am-7pm), and several cafés, and shashlyk and beer stands. It's busiest on Sunday and holidays. Trolleybus 1 and 12 and bus 65, 94 and 166 run along Gogol to the entrance.

THE GOLDEN MAN

The Golden Man (Zolotoy Chelovek in Russian, Altyn Adam in Kazakh) is a warrior's costume from about the 5th century BC that was found in 1969 in a Saka (Scythia) tomb about 60km east of Almaty, near Issik. It is made of more than 4000 separate gold pieces, many of them finely worked with animal motifs, and has a 70cm-high headdress bearing skyward-pointing arrows, a pair of snarling snow leopards and a two-headed winged mythical beast. Though the person who wore this costume may have no genetic connection with modern Kazakhs, the Golden Man has become modern Kazakhstan's favourite national symbol. Replicas adorn museums all over the country and a stone version stands atop the Independence Monument on Almaty's Respublika alanghy (square). A copy was even unveiled by President Nazarbaev in front of the Kazakhstan embassy in Washington, DC, in 2006.

Some, however, believe that Kazakhstan's adopted symbol of warrior strength wasn't a man at all. Archaeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball, in *Warrior Women* (2002), argues that the skeleton in the grave was too badly damaged for its gender to be determined, and that other goods found there suggest the Golden Man was in fact a Golden Woman. Apparently 20% of graves with armaments from the Scythian cultures, of which the Saka were one, were of women.

The current whereabouts of the original treasure are not publicised. Staff in the President's Culture Centre in Astana told us the original was kept there – but not on view.

Museums

In a striking 1908 wooden building (also the work of cathedral architect Zenkov) at the east end of Panfilov Park is the **Museum of Kazakh Musical Instruments** (☎ 261 63 16; Zenkov 24; admission 200T; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), the city's most original museum. It has a fine collection of traditional Kazakh instruments – wooden harps and horns, bagpipes, the lutelike two-stringed *dombra* and the viola-like *qobyz*. If you're there at the same time as a tour group you'll hear tapes of the instruments and see the attendant strum the *dombra*.

The intriguing **Geology Museum** (☎ 261 58 83; Dostyq 85; admission 100T; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) is in the bowels of a building opposite the Hotel Kazakhstan. The country's mineral wealth is on display, with relief maps and touch-screen computers to provide quick geology lessons in English.

The city's best museum stands 300m up Furmanov from Respublika alanghy (square). The **Central State Museum** (☎ 264 23 90; Mikrorayon Samal-1, No 44; admission 80T; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Wed-Mon) takes you through Kazakhstan's history from bronze-age burial mounds to telecommunications and the transfer of the capital to Astana, with many beautiful artefacts. A large replica of the Golden Man (see below) stands in the entrance hall. The downstairs rooms cover archaeological finds and early history up to Jenghiz Khan (with models of some of Kazakhstan's major monuments); the ethnographic display upstairs features a finely kitted-out

yurt and some beautifully worked weaponry and horse and camel gear, plus musical instruments and exotic costumes going back to the 18th century. The upper floors cover the 20th and 21st centuries, with exhibits on some of Kazakhstan's many ethnic groups, independent Kazakhstan and a special section on the pilgrimage town of Turkistan (p148). Get there by bus 2 or 63 or marshrutka 526, 528 or 537 up Furmanov.

The **Kazakhstan Museum of Arts** (☎ 247 83 56; Satpaev 30A; admission 100T; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, closed last day of month) has the best art collection in the country, including works of artists banned during the Soviet period. There are also collections of Russian and Western European art. Particularly interesting are the room of modern Kazakh handicrafts and the large collection of paintings by Abyl Khan Kasteev (1904-73), to whom the museum is dedicated. Kasteev's clear portraits, landscapes and scenes of Soviet progress (railways, hydroelectricity, collective farming) obviously toed the party line but his technique is fabulous. Marshrutkas heading west on Satpaev, including the 520, will stop here.

The combined **Almaty City History Museum & Museum of Repression** (Nauryzbay Batyr 108) was closed for renovations at the time of writing but is well worth checking on. The Repression Museum goes into haunting detail about the fate of thousands who earned Stalin's ire.

Kök-Töbe Cable Car

This smooth, gleaming and recently renovated **cable car** (one-way 300T; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon, Wed & Thu, 4pm-midnight Tue, 11am-1am Fri-Sun) runs from beside the Palace of the Republic on Dostyq up to Kök-Töbe (Green Hill) on the city's southeast edge. The hill is crowned by a 372m-high **telecommunications tower**. Near the top station are a viewing platform, crafts stalls and a cafeteria doing good shashlyk. If you go during the day, the walk back down to Dostyq is a pleasant one.

Respublika Alanghy

This broad ceremonial square at the high southern end of Almaty, created in Soviet times, is a block uphill from Abay. The focal point is the attractive **Monument to Independence**. The stone column is surmounted with a replica of the Golden Man standing on a winged snow leopard, and is flanked at its

base by fountains and two bas-relief walls depicting scenes from Kazakhstan's history. Overlooking the square from the south is the neoclassical-style **city government building** and, at the southeast corner opposite the Central State Museum, a large official **Presidential Residence** (Furmanov 205). You can reach the square on bus 2 or 63 or marshrutka 526, 528 or 537 going up Furmanov from Gogol.

St Nicholas Cathedral

The pale turquoise Nikolsky Sobor, with its gold onion domes, stands out west of the centre near the corner of Qabanbay Batyr and Baytursynuly. The cathedral was built in 1909 and later used as a stable for Bolshevik cavalry, before reopening about 1980. It's a terrifically atmospheric place, like a corner of old Russia, with icons, candles and restored frescoes inside and black-clad old supplicants outside. For the best impression visit at festival times such as Orthodox Christmas Day (7 January) or Easter for the midnight services.

ACTIVITIES

At the **Arasan Baths** (☎ 272 40 18; nr Ayteke Bi & Qonaev; admission until 2pm Tue-Fri 500T, other times 800T, 20-min massage 2000T; ☎ sessions start every 2hr, 8am-8pm Tue-Sun) you can choose from Russian (*Russkaya*), Finnish (*Finskaya*) and Turkish (*Vostochnaya*) baths, the latter with three different temperatures of heated stone platforms plus a plunge pool. Each part has men's and women's sections. Take along soap, a towel and some flip-flops for walking around in. Go with a friend or two and you'll find it's an enjoyable and truly relaxing experience. If you don't have any bathing gear handy, there's a shop in the lobby. Sellers with *veniki* (bunches of oak and birch leaves) wait outside, if you fancy stimulating your circulation with a good thrashing. Built in the early 1980s in a modernistic Soviet style, this is the finest bathhouse in Central Asia.

Rakhat Fitness (☎ 255 58 88; www.rakhat-fitness.kz; Abay 48; ☎ 7am-11pm), near the Central Stadium, has the best **public swimming pool** (per day 4000T, 12 visits 13,000T) in the city, 50m long and open year-round (it's covered in winter). No medical certificate is required.

Two shopping malls, **Ramstor** (Furmanov 226) and **Mega Center Alma-Ata** (Rozhybakiev 247A), have small **skating rinks** (Mega Center has a climbing centre too), and in January and February you can skate on the iced-over football field at the

Dinamo Stadium (☎ 261 48 67; Nauryzbay Batyr 89). But Central Asia's top skating experience is out in the hills at Medeu (p130).

Fantasy World (nr Abay & Musrepov; admission 1200T; ☎ 1-9pm) is an up-to-the-minute amusement park with rides that will thrill anyone – 200T extra for the vertiginous Cobra loop or the ultra-popular dodgems.

ALMATY WALKING TOUR

Respublika alanghy (1; opposite) is the best place to start an Almaty walk; not only is it all downhill from here, but on a clear morning the square provides a panoramic view of the snowcapped mountains. Head east along Satpaev and turn down Dostyq. Behind the large **statue** (2) of the iconic writer Abay Kunanbaev, is the **Palace of the Republic** (3; p126), a concert hall. Here you could detour for a ride on the **Kök-Töbe cable car** (4; opposite) for great views across the city.

A block north of the **Hotel Kazakhstan** (5; p122), turn west along Shevchenko to the magnificent **Academy of Sciences** (6; nr Shevchenko & Qonaev) building, one of the true gems of Soviet monumental architecture. Fountains and parks around the building make this a cool spot to linger in summer. Check out the 'Eastern Calendar' fountain with Chinese zodiac creatures on the east side of the academy.

Head downhill on tree-lined Tölebaev as far as Qabanbay Batyr, where you can drop into the city's best coffee shop, **Coffeedelia** (7; p123), for a pause and refreshments. Head west to the fine neoclassical **Abay State Opera & Ballet Theatre** (8; p126). Two blocks north of here is a small park in front of another imposing Soviet pile, the old parliament, now the **Kazakh-British Technical University** (9; Töle Bi btwn Abylay Khan & Panfilov). In the park you'll find a **statue** (10) to local war heroes Manshuk Mametova and Alie Moldagulova, which replaced the one of Lenin, removed after independence.

Head east along Töle Bi then north on Qonaev to **Panfilov Park** (11; p118). Strike west along Gogol, lined with some of the city's fanciest shops, then a block north on Abylay Khan and then east along Zhibek Zholy. This pedestrianised street, with cafés, a few buskers and artists, is Almaty's (sort of) version of Moscow's Arbat. A few blocks east is the **Zelyony Bazar** (12; p125), the city's most colourful market, with a true flavour of Central Asia. Just north of the market along Pushkin you can (except on Friday) visit Almaty's blue-domed, white-marble **central mosque** (13), built

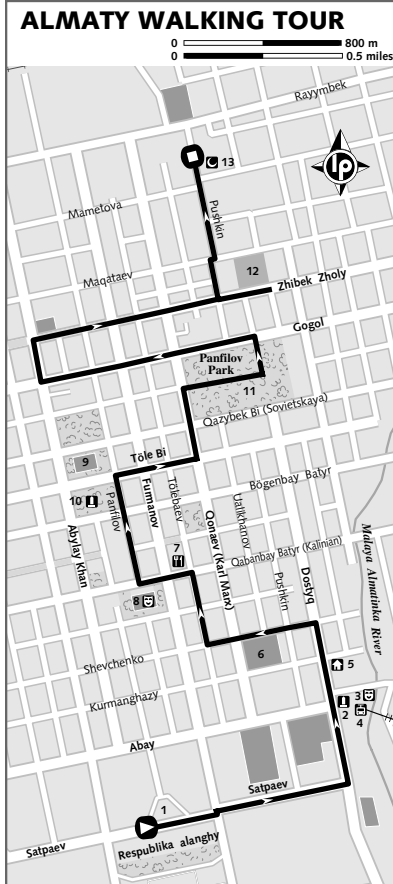
WALK FACTS

Start Respublika alanghy

Finish Central mosque

Distance 8km

Duration Four hours



in 1999 and the largest in the country, with space for 3000 worshippers (women must cover their heads, arms and legs here).

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Nauryz (22 March) sees colourful parades in the city, and horse-racing and even the occasional game of *kökpar* at the Hippodrome (p127).

There's an international **jazz festival** at the State Philharmonia (p126) in early April, and in early August, the **Voice of Asia** pop contest/festival, a kind of Asian Eurovision, is held either in variable venues in Almaty or out at Medeu (p130).

The **Eurasia Film Festival** (late September and early October) features a programme of international movies at the Palace of the Republic (p126) with tickets as cheap as 200T in some cases, and visits by foreign actors.

SLEEPING

Room prices have escalated here and the choices in the budget and lower midrange are dreary. For those who are probably not paying their own bills there's no shortage of excellent top-end and upper midrange hotels. Travel agencies such as CATC (p117) offer discounts from walk-in rates at some hotels. Agencies can also be useful for making reservations when calling a hotel yourself is getting you nowhere.

Budget

Third Dormitory (Obschchezhitie No 3; ☎ 262 01 61; cnr Ualikhanov & Satpaev; dm 1000T) The 4th floor of this university accommodation block functions as a cheap hotel. Rooms have two or four beds and are basic but clean enough, as are the shared bathrooms. Go down Ualikhanov from Satpaev and in through a black iron gate on the left, then into the first door of the building on the left. 'Reception' is the first room on the left, inside.

Hotel Saulet (☎ 267 11 75; Furmanov 187; dm 1000T, d with private bathroom 2000-5000T) Another basic but acceptable option in the upper part of town, but they sometimes refuse foreigners. Look for the building with the 'Kafe Bar' sign.

Gostinitsa (☎ 260 42 13; Almaty-II; dm 1500T) This is upstairs from the international hall of Almaty-II train station, on the left as you enter the building. Dorms are small, with hard beds and shared bathrooms, but acceptable if you arrive late. You can have a bed for one hour for 500T, or from morning to evening for 1000T.

Hotel Dan (☎ 273 75 22; fax 274 76 15; Zhandosov 1; r with shared bathroom 3000-3750T, with private bathroom 4000-6000T) Dilapidated but habitable and reasonably friendly, the Dan is in an OK area about 200m west of the Russian consulate. Most rooms have TV, some have a phone. Bus 66 and trolleybus 12 run past here; the

entrance is back from the street, at the west end of the building.

Hotel Turkistan (☎ /fax 266 41 36; Maqataeva 49; s/d 3000/5000T) This modernised hotel opposite the Zelyony Bazar, used by many traders from China and other Central Asian countries, is decent value but security may not be the tightest. Standard rooms have TV, phone and bathroom with small bathtub.

Hotel Tranzit (☎ 233 04 38, 233 04 16; Zheltoqsan 12; s/d 3800/5500T, midnight-noon 3000/4000T, 2hrs per person 1500T) Just outside Almaty-II station, the Tranzit has clean if weary rooms with private bathroom, TV and phone.

APARTMENTS

Stantours (p117) can provide apartments for US\$60 to US\$80 per night, with a two-night minimum and an obligatory airport or station transfer (US\$30). Karlygash Makatova (p118) also provides apartments starting at US\$40.

Midrange

Hotel Zhetisu (☎ 250 04 07; fax 250 04 16; Abylay Khan 55; s/d with shared bathroom 4200/6300T, with private bathroom s 5400-9800T, d 7800-20,900T; ☎) This is not a place that lifts the spirits: reception may pretend the rooms with shared bathroom don't exist and it's a good idea to unplug the phone to avoid middle-of-the-night calls from prostitutes. But the location is pretty central and the rooms are clean, reasonably big and equipped with satellite TV. Rates include breakfast. In-house services include a one-computer 'business centre' and a travel agency. Trolleybuses 5 and 6 from Almaty-II station along Abylay Khan go past the door.

Hotel Kazakhstan (☎ 291 91 01; www.ceebed.co.uk/hotelkazakhstan; Dostyq 52; s/d unrenovated 6400/11,600T, renovated 14,800/19,800T; ☎) This 26-floor hotel was built in 1977 and its rooms are typical of upper-range Soviet tourist hotels – comfy enough but uninspiring. The renovated ones have more modern décor and thicker carpets, but similarly small bathrooms. All include breakfast, satellite TV and modem connections. Unfortunately the top-floor Cosmos Café, where the buffet breakfast used to be served, was closed for renovations at last check.

Saya Hotel (☎ 272 32 65; fax 261 16 10; Furmanov 135; s/d with shared bathroom 8000/12,000T, d with private bathroom 15,000-30,000T) Helpful staff and just 12 pretty, well-equipped rooms with breakfast included.

Hotel Uyt (☎ 279 55 11; fax 279 89 79; Gogol 127/1; s/d from 8850/12,500T; ☎ ☎) Next door to the Kazzhol, this hotel has similar standards but lacks the same welcoming touch. Breakfast is included.

our pick **Hotel Kazzhol** (☎ 250 89 41; www.kazju.kz; Gogol 127/1; s/d from 9900/11,900T; ☎ ☎) This friendly, sparkling-clean hotel on a quiet lane between Gogol and Zhibek Zholy is the best value at this sort of price. Desk staff speak English, the smart rooms all have writing desks, satellite TV and minibars, and there's an excellent little European and Kazakh restaurant downstairs. Rates include breakfast.

Hotel Almaty (☎ 272 00 70/47; www.hotel-almaty.kz; Qabanbay Batyr 85; s 10,000-15,000T, d 17,000-30,000T; ☎) This large concrete pile opposite the Abay State Opera & Ballet Theatre was recently upgraded and provides pleasing pine-furnished rooms with gleaming bathrooms. Reception speaks some English and there's a 24-hour pharmacy in the building. All rooms are equipped with phone, TV and minibar. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Tyan-Shan (☎ 291 91 60/1; Qonaev 151; s/d 12,800/16,000T; ☎ ☎) Three-star branch of the Tien Shan Grand Hotel (below), with very big, comfortable, carpeted rooms, plus sauna and fitness room – good value.

Hotel Otrar (☎ 250 68 48; www.group.kz; Gogol 73; s/d from 14,288/17,328T; ☎ ☎) Well situated facing Panfilov Park, the Otrar dates from Soviet times but stands up very well. It has spick-and-span rooms with air-con and satellite TV, a fitness room, sauna and a good help-yourself breakfast (included in rates).

Top End

Hotel Ambassador (☎ 250 89 89; www.ambassadorhotel.kz; Zheltoqsan 121; s/d US\$177/234; ☎ ☎) Very good smaller hotel in the heart of the city, in a modernised 1930s building with classical décor. Free airport pickups offered. Breakfast is included.

Tien Shan Grand Hotel (☎ 244 96 99; ghts_reservation@mail.ru; Bögenbay Batyr 115; s/d from 38,000/46,000T; ☎) Elegant new medium-sized hotel in the handsome former Geology Ministry building, facing a small park. Has an excellent spa with saunas, massage and a good pool. Rates include breakfast.

Hyatt Regency Almaty (☎ 250 12 34; www.almaty.hyatt.com; Satpaev 29/6; s/d from 52,900/59,800T; ☎ ☎) One of Almaty's two luxury international hotels, built around a huge glass-

domed atrium. It's a little further from the centre than the InterContinental.

InterContinental Almaty (☎ 250 50 00; www.ichotels.group.com; Zheltoqsan 181; r from 53,000T; ☎ ☎ ☎) Just southwest of Respublika alanghy, this glitzy high-rise hotel is widely known by a former name, the Ankara. It has plenty of five-star amenities including seven restaurants, cafés and bars, and a costly business centre. Glass lifts glide up and down the 12-storey atrium. Rooms are very comfy with broadband internet access, and breakfast is included.

EATING

You won't find a better range of good restaurants anywhere else in Central Asia, so make the most of them. A large range of international cuisines is represented and some places have great design and ambience too.

Cafés

Coffeedelia (☎ 272 64 09; Qabanbay Batyr 79; coffees, juices, cakes & pastries 280-800T; ☎) 8am-midnight Mon-Thu, 8am-1am Fri, 9am-1am Sat, 9am-midnight Sun) Almaty's best and trendiest coffee house, with a relaxed atmosphere; fabulous cakes and pastries, a range of good coffees, teas and juices; and free wi-fi internet. On weekend evenings it morphs into a preparty gathering spot, with DJs providing the sound on Friday.

Biskvit (☎ 291 66 92; coffees, cakes & pastries from 300T; Shevchenko 18; ☎) 8am-midnight) Another great coffee house, marginally smarter than Coffeedelia, with arguably the best coffee in town. Good for breakfast too.

Restaurants

Yubileyny (cnr Gogol & Abylay Khan; dishes 100-300T; ☎) 24hr) Hats off to the bloke who introduced tortilla-wrapped doner kebabs to Almaty. Long lines form all day for these tasty creations, stuffed with meat, sour cream, sliced carrot and French fries, served out front of the large supermarket here. There's *plov* too, to take away or eat in the cafeteria areas either side, which also do good coffee, great doughnuts and self-serve meals. The perfect zone for easy food on the go.

Qorqyt Ata (☎ 273 50 07; Zhibek Zholy 68; dishes 200-600T; ☎) 9am-10pm) A good-value budget place beside the Silk Way Mall on pedestrianised Zhibek Zholy. Offerings include *plov*, *manty*, *shashlyk* and pizzas.

Shi Bon Kha (☎ 273 56 76; Qonaev 64; dishes 300-600T; ☎) noon-midnight) This cottage-like restaurant, in

a courtyard, specialises in inexpensive Dungan (Chinese Muslim) food, including terrific spicy *laghman* (noodle, meat and vegetable soup). No alcohol here.

Kafe Keruen (☎ 273 98 50; Zhibek Zholy 77A; mains 400-800T; ☎ noon-midnight) The covered outdoor area here is a nice place to watch the passing parade on pedestrianised Zhibek Zholy, though the food doesn't quite live up to the promise of the exotic menu which includes Galician molluscs and fajitas El Paso as well as a huge variety of shashlyk.

Dastarkhan (☎ 272 54 27; Shevchenko 75; dishes 400-2000T; ☎ 24hr) A good place for Kazakh as well as Russian food, with several modern rooms on two floors (one of them even nonsmoking), plus sidewalk tables. You can have *beshbarmak* or Balkhash *sudak* (pike) here as well as basics such as *plov*, *laghman* and *manty* and a big choice of lamb dishes.

Inara (☎ 291 78 06; Kaldayakov 58; dishes 500-750T; ☎ 11am-11pm) Opposite the State Philharmonia, arboretum-style Inara has friendly service, a buzzy atmosphere and big, cheap plates of barbecued meat with onion and cucumber trimmings – an authentic Kazakh experience.

Kishlak (☎ 261 56 01; Seyfullin 540A; meat dishes 500-800T; ☎ noon-2am) This atmospheric Uzbek restaurant near Respublika alanghy is decked with vines and bamboo and offers some low *chaikhana*-type tables with cushions and optional hookahs. The salads, shashlyk and fish dishes are all great. There's a dance show on Friday and Saturday nights.

Printsessya Turandot (☎ 292 38 32; Abay 103; dishes 500-1200T; ☎ noon-midnight) A reasonably priced Chinese restaurant at the side of the Auezov Theatre, popular with locals and a few foreigners. Vegetarians will like the clay-pot-baked tofu and eggplant dishes. If it's too cold on the large terrace, the red-and-gold wallpaper inside will help warm you up.

Traktir Zhili-Byli (☎ 250 75 13; Kurmanghazy 43; mains 600-950T, salad bar 1200T; ☎ noon-midnight) Good-value Russian food in a rustic, log-walled setting.

Restoran Printsessa (Princess; ☎ 261 06 27; Tolebaev 53; dishes 600-1000T; ☎ noon-midnight) Come to this large, bustling restaurant just off Gogol for a filling Chinese meal. The menu offers a big choice including a good chicken, chilli and peanuts dish.

Mama Mia (☎ 273 38 73; Gogol 87; dishes 600-1300T; ☎ noon-midnight) Bright, relaxed, little pizza/

pasta/salad house with efficient service and a good choice of tasty food.

Namaste (☎ 292 24 84; cnr Satpaev & Baytursynuly; mains 700-2000T; ☎ 11am-last guest) This small, tranquil restaurant does excellent Indian, Thai and Chinese food – great for vegetarians.

American Bar & Grill (☎ 250 50 13; www.rosinter.ru; Tole Bi 41; dishes 790-3000T; ☎ 24hr) The burgers (790T) are the best in Almaty and there's a big American, Tex-Mex and Italian choice, in a ranch-style interior with good rock, jazz or swing music. The wooden outdoor annex is packed in summer.

Shvabsky Domik (☎ 261 05 14; www.shvabskiy-domik.kz; Abylay Khan 121; mains 800-2000T, set lunch 650-900T; ☎ 24hr) This spacious, German-cottage-style establishment serves reliably good international food with a strong German emphasis – lots of sausage and meat.

ourpick Safran (☎ 293 83 83; Dostyk 36; mains 800-1800T, set lunch 900-1200T; ☎ noon-midnight) Flavoursome Middle Eastern food in a beautiful, spacious Middle Eastern setting makes Safran a great place to head when you have 4000T to 5000T to spend on dinner. Tasty dishes range from hummus and falafel to carrot-and-cumin soup, sea-bass ceviche and Moroccan chicken with pumpkin-and-ginger sauce.

Zheti Qazyna (☎ 273 25 87; Abylay Khan 58A; mains 800-8000T; ☎ noon-midnight) This Uzbek-themed restaurant is the place for Central Asian cooking at its finest. Old favourites such as *manty*, *laghman* and *samsa* (samosas) are styled for the Western palate, and there are Kazakh specialities including *beshbarmak* too. It's at least worth patronising for the colourful ambience and welcoming staff. On the same premises are Caramel, an equally popular European restaurant, and the Japanese-Chinese Tsi, and you can order from all three menus in any part. Two courses will cost a minimum of 1400T, and you can easily spend a whole lot more. The entrance is actually on Maqataeva.

Pomodoro Caffé (☎ 261 83 26; Panfilov 108; pasta 1000-1600T, other dishes up to 4000T; ☎ noon-midnight Mon-Sat) Gourmet little Italian spot with an Italian owner-chef preparing delicious salmon-and-cheese ravioli, spaghetti with courgettes and shrimps in cream sauce, and much more. He makes some of his own pasta.

Mad Murphy's (☎ 291 28 56; Tole Bi 12; dishes 1100-1700T; ☎ food noon-10pm) This evergreen Irish pub (opposite) has plenty of good pub food in big portions.

Thai (☎ 291 01 90; Dostyk 50; mains 2000-7000T; ☎ 11am-11pm) This very swish restaurant with a pleasant outdoor summer terrace specialises in Thai and Japanese dishes. The quality is high and the fish in most dishes is flown in direct from Muscat, Oman.

Self-Catering

There are plenty of large, well-stocked supermarkets with many Western imports on their shelves.

Yubileyny (☎ 250 75 50; cnr Gogol & Abylay Khan; ☎ 24hr) One of the biggest supermarkets in Almaty, with a deli and all manner of Western food and toiletries.

Stolichny (☎ 266 25 55; cnr Abylay Khan & Qabanbay Batyr; ☎ 24hr) Best-quality goods of any downtown supermarket, huge wine section and good deli counter.

Zelyony Bazar (Green Market, Kök Bazar; Zhibek Zholy 53; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) Stalls at this large central market are piled with nuts, fresh and dried fruit, smoked fish, vegetables and enormous hunks of fresh meat. You can get *kumys* (fermented mare's milk) and *shubat* (fermented camel's milk) here too. Cafés overlooking the action will serve you a bowl of *laghman*, tea and bread for less than 300T.

Further good supermarkets are **SM Market** (Maqataeva; ☎ 24hr), **Silk Way City Gipermarket** (☎ 267 74 74; Tole Bi 71; ☎ 24hr) and **Ramstor** (☎ 258 75 75; Furmanov 226; ☎ 9am-11pm).

DRINKING

Finding a drink for any budget isn't difficult in Almaty as many daytime cafés and restaurants become bars by night. Beer gardens under sunshades sprout around the city in summer.

Soho (☎ 267 03 67; Qazybek Bi 65; ☎ 9pm-3am) Ex-pats and local friends and colleagues pack Soho every night for tankards of beer, international food and crowded dancing to the excellent resident rock-blues band. It's got a sort of urban-global theme, with lots of pictures of New York mixed in with flags for every nationality – one place that never lacks atmosphere.

Mad Murphy's (☎ 291 28 56; Tole Bi 12; ☎ 11.30am-1am) This Irish pub is the most consistently popular expat haunt for a stout, pub grub (opposite), darts, pool and football on big screens.

Shtab (Zheltoqsan; beer from 150T; ☎ 10am-midnight) Tiny local beer bar opposite Hotel Ambassa-

dor, with half-a-dozen tables and a big selection of local and foreign draft beers including Kazakhstan's best, Shymkentskoe.

Tinkoff (☎ 292 49 00; Satpaev 27A; beer 0.5/1/1.5L 500/900/1400T; ☎ noon-2am) This trendy, modern, three-floor bar-restaurant brews its own draught beer in six varieties, and the open roof terrace is great in summer. The 2nd-floor, with ceiling-to-floor windows, serves sausages, shashlyk and pizzas (800T to 1600T) and has occasional live music.

San Siro (☎ 272 05 94; Bögenbay Batyr 117; ☎ 24hr) Almaty's temple of TV football – it has different soccer matches on different screens and can even show you a programme of upcoming games. It serves a good range of food too.

Vogue (☎ 264 16 99; Satpaev 11) Fashionable preclub bar with décor inspired by *Vogue* magazine – old-gold drapes, grapefruit-toned couches.

Guinness Pub (☎ 291 55 85; Dostyk 71; ☎ 11am-2am) Popular pub near the Hotel Kazakhstan, with the famous Irish stout on tap, as well as pool tables, food and live music most nights.

Dublin Pub (☎ 272 14 75; Bayseyitova 45; ☎ 11am-1am) A smaller, wood-panelled Irish pub on a quiet street near Respublika alanghy. It has assorted international food and the terrace is nice in summer.

ENTERTAINMENT

If you can make some sense of Russian, *Time Out Almaty* (www.timeout.kz) is a great source of listings, reviews and contact details.

Cinema

English-language films dubbed into Russian, including top recent releases, form a high proportion of the programming at Almaty's many cinemas. Admission costs 400T to 900T. For programmes see www.kino.kz or www.timeout.kz.

The **Kinoteatr Tsezar** (☎ 273 63 93; Furmanov 50; 500T; ☎ 8pm Mon) shows arthouse movies for much of the year.

Concerts, Ballet, Opera & Theatre

Almaty is blessed with a good theatre scene and it's well worth catching at least one performance while you're here. Keep an eye open for concerts by the renowned **State Kurmangazy Orchestra of Folk Instruments** (www.orchestra.kz) and the Otrar Sazy Kazakh Folk Orchestra.

Abay State Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 272 79 34; Qabanbay Batyr 110; ☎ ticket office 10am-6pm) Almaty's top cultural venue; three or four performances a week at 6.30pm. Classics such as *Swan Lake*, *La Bohème*, *Aida* and *Carmen* are a few of the regular shows. Also look out for Kazakh operas such as *Abay* and *Abylay Khan*.

Auezov Kazakh Drama Theatre (☎ 292 33 07; Abay 103) Elegant example of Soviet architecture with almost nightly drama performances.

Kazkontsert Hall (☎ 279 14 26; Abylay Khan 83) Classical, jazz and other concerts.

State Philharmonic (☎ 291 80 48, 291 75 21; www.philharmonic.kz; Kaldayakov 35) A range of performances including symphony, chamber, jazz, organ and traditional music.

Palace of the Republic (Dvoretz Respubliki; ☎ 291 55 23; Dostyq 102) Stages assorted musical events including pop concerts.

Gay & Lesbian Venues

There's a small underground scene in Almaty and the gay bars tend to come and go, so you might need to ask around to find out what is new. For some club info (in Russian) see www.gay.kz or www.timeout.kz.

Real Club (☎ 233 57 26; Rayymbek 152; Sun-Thu men free, Fri & Sat 600T, women Sun-Thu 500T, Fri & Sat 1000T; ☎ 11pm-6am) This is consistently the most popular gay club but it changes locations a lot. Has shows at 2am Friday and Saturday nights.

XXX (☎ 276 58 02, 705-1483837; Zhubanov 18V; women 300-500T, men 500-700T; ☎ from 11pm Tue-Sun) Friendly, mostly lesbian club out in the west of the city, 6km beyond the Central Stadium.

Da Freak (right) is gay-friendly.

Live Music

Cuba (☎ 291 29 32; Bögenbay Batyr 102; admission 1500T; ☎ from noon) This Mexican-Russian restaurant is Almaty's Latin music hotspot with live bands whipping up a great atmosphere from 10pm to 1am Thursday and midnight to 3am Friday and Saturday. For Friday and Saturday you need to book a table by about 6pm. Dinner with drinks costs 2000T to 4000T.

Members Bar (☎ 250 50 00; Mezzanine, InterContinental Almaty, Zheltoqsan 181; ☎ 7pm-2am Mon-Sat) Cocktail-lounge-style jazz music. Resident artist at the time of writing, Geraldine Hunt, puts on a fine show from 11pm Tuesday to Saturday.

Soho (p125) has a polished rock and blues band nightly from 10pm.

Nightclubs

Almaty's educated and aware students and 20-somethings have spawned a pretty good, ever-developing club scene. Flyers will get you in cheap to some clubs. *Time Out Almaty* has up-to-date listings in Russian. There are lots of special events and parties: www.night.kz (in a mix of English and Russian) has a calendar. Full-moon raves happen in summer out at Lake Kapshagay, with DJs flown in from Europe.

ourpick Da Freak (☎ 273 13 37; Gogol 40; admission 1500T; ☎ 11pm-6am Fri & Sat) The best electronic club in town, Freak has two dance floors, the country's top DJs and sometimes guests from Moscow or Western Europe. The clientele is mostly a cool, 20ish, local crowd but there's a smattering of international 20s-to-35s in there too. The entrance is round the back of the Zhuldyz restaurant in Panfilov Park.

Stereo (☎ 293 04 93; Dosmukhamedov 115; admission 1000T; ☎ 10pm-4am Tue-Thu, 11pm-6am Sat & Sun) Successful new club on a lane between Abay and Kurmanghazy: There's house or chill-out in one room with Soviet-style décor and soul, funk and R&B in the other.

Mostafterpartyclub (☎ 233 04 57; www.most-club.kz; Kommunalnaya 12; admission 1000-1500T; ☎ 11pm-5am Sun-Thu, 11pm-9am Fri & Sat) This late club is big with a nouveau-riche and expat crowd. There's deep tech and tribal on the big dance floor, plus an oriental-style hookah room and a lounge-bar also with DJs. On Fridays and Saturdays retro '80s sessions start at 11pm; the afterparty begins at 3am.

Gas (☎ 272 74 74; Shevchenko 100; admission free-500T; ☎ 10pm-6am Wed-Mon) Another popular electronic haunt with DJs; no sportswear in this shiny glass-and-steel environment.

Petroleum (☎ 261 35 35; Shevchenko 100; men/women 2000/1500T; ☎ 10pm-6am) Upstairs from Gas, this flashy DJ dance club pumps out hip-hop and techno to an older crowd including foreign business chaps and local working girls. This is a place where you may want to dress up.

Crystal (☎ 292 52 95; Timiryazev btwn Baytursynuly & Markova; admission 2000T; ☎ 11pm-6am Fri & Sat) An 'elite' New York-style club popular with the Range Rover crowd, Crystal has DJs playing mostly European and American house and R&B (in separate rooms). The entrance is on Timiryazev. Downstairs is **Nice Bar** (☎ 292 38 25; Volodarskogo 29), with sink-into sofas and velvet-curtained private alcoves.

Sport

Hippodrome (☎ 294 86 00; Zhansugirov) Horse races and occasionally *kökpar* (see Buzkashi, p59), take place several kilometres north of the centre. Get someone to call ahead and see what's on. Take a taxi, or bus 8 northbound on Qonaev from Töle Bi.

Central Stadium (☎ 292 47 10; Abay 48) Club and international soccer matches are played here.

SHOPPING

TsUm (☎ 273 29 51; Zhibek Zholy 85; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) Visit this large central department store, composed of dozens of small shops, for the experience as well as to buy. It deals mainly in electronic goods, clothes, cosmetics, glass, china and gifts, and prices are reasonable. On the ground floor you'll find a bigger variety of mobile phones than you've ever seen in one place, and the top floor has the best range of kitsch souvenirs and gifts in the country – ornamental swords and horse whips, fur and felt hats, traditional jewellery and miniature yurts, camels and Golden Men.

Republican Palace of Schoolchildren (☎ 264 25 93; Dostyq 114) The Central Asian Crafts Fairs held here from 10am to 5pm a couple of Sundays a month from December to early March, offer a good range of artisanry at good prices. The craft and carpet stalls in the Central State Museum and Kazakhstan Museum of Arts (p120) are worth a look too. A 2m by 3m Kazakh carpet typically costs around US\$400.

Tengri Umai (☎ 258 11 52; Panfilov 103) This gallery has the country's best selection of modern art, by artists from Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics. Bright colours predominate and there's some very appealing work here.

Meloman (☎ 273 10 24; Gogol 58; ☎ 10am-midnight) A good place for recorded music, plus DVDs and videos in Russian and Kazakh. It's a national chain and there are several other branches in Almaty.

For sports gear, including trainers and winter sports equipment, head to **Sport Land** (☎ 272 06 06; Tole Bi 78; ☎ 10am-8pm) or **Megasport** (☎ 273 09 02; Maqataev 84; ☎ 10am-8pm).

Almaty's burgeoning middle class shops at supermarkets and glitzy malls stocked with expensive, often imported, goods and at international stores such as Zara, Yves Rocher and Benetton, which you'll find dotted all around the city centre. The main malls include **Silk Way City** (☎ 267 74 70; Töle Bi 71; ☎ 24hr), **Ramstor**

(☎ 258 75 75; Furmanov 226; ☎ 9am-11pm) and the biggest and newest, **Mega Center Alma-Ata** (Rozbakiev 247A).

Markets

Watch out for pickpockets in these places.

Zelyony Bazar (Green Market; Zhibek Zholy 53; ☎ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun) A sprawling place with a big indoor hall and vendors spread outside too. Much of it is devoted to food (see p125) but there are stalls with clothing and other goods.

Barakholka (☎ Tue-Sun) This huge, crowded flea market is on the ring road in the north-western outskirts. Uzbeks, Chinese, Uyghurs and others converge here to sell everything from animals, fridges and cars to fur hats, jeans and shoes, at very good prices. Week-ends, especially early Sunday morning, are the busiest times. Take any 'Barakholka' bus westbound on Rayymbek.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Almaty is Kazakhstan's main air hub and is linked to most major Kazakhstan cities by daily trains. Long-distance buses reach many cities in southern, northern and eastern Kazakhstan, but a long haul is usually more comfortable by train.

For further information on international travel to/from Almaty, see Transport in Kazakhstan (p183) and Transport in Central Asia (p461).

Air

Flights, nearly all by Air Astana or SCAT, go once or more daily to Aktau (22,500T to 27,000T), Aqtöbe (28,200T), Astana (20,000T), Atyrau (35,000T), Karaganda (19,000T), Kyzylorda (16,500T to 18,400T), Pavlodar (27,400T), Shymkent (16,000T) and Ust-Kamenogorsk (18,500T to 25,000T); five times a week to Semey (16,500T); four times to Kokshetau (24,500T) and Petropavlovsk (24,500T); three times to Uralsk (32,500T); and twice to Taraz (12,500T). For international flights see below.

Tickets can be bought at many agencies around town including the **Gorodskoy Aero-vokzal** (City Air Terminal; cnr Zhibek Zholy & Zheltoqsan; ☎ 8am-10pm).

AIRLINE OFFICES

Not all airlines have offices in Almaty, but agencies such as CATC (p117), which sells tickets for all airlines, should be able to help

if you can't contact an airline. Airlines flying from Almaty to international destinations include the following (subject to change, of course):

Air Astana (☎ 250 68 50; www.airastana.com; Hotel Otrar, Gogol 73) Moscow twice daily, Amsterdam, Beijing and Dubai four times weekly, Frankfurt and Istanbul three times weekly, Delhi and London twice weekly, Hanover and Seoul once weekly.

Asiana Airlines (☎ 257 25 25; www.flyasiana.com; Office 511, Hotel Kazakhstan 67, Dostyq 52) Seoul weekly, with connections to Asia, Australia and the US.

British Airways (☎ 272 40 40; www.britishairways.com; Dostyq 43) London three times weekly.

China Southern Airlines (www.cs-air.com) Ürümqi (US\$300) five times weekly.

Georgian National Airlines (☎ 279 52 25; www.national-avia.com; Zhibek Zholy 125) Tbilisi twice weekly.

Imair (☎ 279 38 84; www.imair.com; Zhibek Zholy 125) Baku twice weekly.

Kam Air (www.flykamair.com) Kabul once weekly.

KLM (☎ 250 77 47; www.klm.com; Hotel Otrar, Gogol 73) Amsterdam five times weekly.

Kras Air (☎ 261 04 14; www.krasair.ru; Dostyq 85) Novosibirsk and Krasnoyarsk once weekly.

Lufthansa (☎ 250 50 52; www.lufthansa.com; Hyatt Regency Almaty, Satpaev 29/6) Frankfurt daily.

Pulkovo (☎ 273 26 11; www.pulkovo.ru; Furmanov 65) St Petersburg three times weekly.

SCAT (www.scat.kz) Dushanbe twice weekly; once weekly to Moscow, Yerevan and Bayan-Ölgii (Ulgit), Mongolia (US\$250).

Tajik Air (☎ 257 21 55; www.tajikistan-airlines.com) Dushanbe three times weekly.

Transaero (☎ 273 93 90; www.transaero.ru; Furmanov 53) Moscow daily.

Turkish Airlines (☎ 250 10 67; www.turkishairlines.com; Furmanov 100) Istanbul daily.

UM Air (☎ 257 19 49; www.umairlines.com; Akhmetov 6) Kiev twice weekly.

Ural Airlines (☎ 223 98 48; www.uralairlines.com; Pobeda 52) Yekaterinburg twice weekly.

Uzbekistan Airlines (☎ 261 19 62; www.uzairways.com; Office 125/126, Qazybek Bi 50) Tashkent daily (US\$185).

Bus, Minibus & Taxi

Long-distance buses currently use the **Sayran bus station** (Novy avtovokzal; ☎ 276 26 44; cnr Töle Bi & Utegen Batyr), 5km west of the centre, but there are plans to replace Sayram with a new terminal even further out west, so check before you go there. Destinations include Karaganda (2800T, 20 hours, 2pm and 10pm), Shymkent (1400T, 12 hours, 8pm and 9.30pm), Taldyqorgha

(650T, four hours, 17 daily), Taraz (1100T, nine hours, six daily), Turkistan (1200T, 15 hours, 11pm), Ust-Kamenogorsk (3100T, 22 hours, 7.30am and 5.30pm) and Zharkent (800T, six hours, five daily). For road transport to Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and Ürümqi (China), see p184 and p183 respectively.

Quicker minibuses to some of the nearer destinations wait at the front of the Sayran bus station building and even quicker shared taxis wait on Utegen Batyr (at the side of the bus station). To Taldyqorgha it's 700T (four hours) by minibus and 2000T (three hours) by taxi; to Taraz it's 1200T (eight hours) by minibus and 3000T (six hours) by taxi.

Most nearer destinations are served by the **Saykhat bus station** (Stary Avtovokzal; ☎ 230 25 29; Rayymbek). Buses go every 15 minutes to Talgar (60T, 30 minutes) and Issik (Yesik; 60T, 45 minutes), and there are several minibuses to Kegen (800T, three to four hours). Services to Taldyqorgha may be added here.

Car

One of the very few car rental companies operating here is **Europcar** (☎ 258 16 81; www.europcar.com; Bayseyitova 33). Small and medium-sized cars cost around US\$125 to US\$160 per day with unlimited kilometres. A driver can be provided for an extra fee.

Train

Nearly all main long-distance trains stop at **Almaty-I station** (☎ 296 33 92), 8km north of the centre at the end of Seyfullin, but fortunately most terminate at the more convenient **Almaty-II station** (☎ 296 55 44), at the end of Abylay Khan on the northern edge of the central area. There are train ticket offices in the centre, including in the Gorodskoy Aerovokzal (p127), as well as inside the stations and on Abylay Khan just south of Almaty-II, where tickets are available 24 hours. You need to show your passport when buying tickets.

Destinations served at least daily (in some cases several times daily), with typical 2nd-class (*kupeynyy*) fares, include Astana (5300T, 19 to 21 hours), Aqtöbe (5500T, 40 to 46 hours), Kokshetau (6500T, 25 hours), Kyzylorda (3600T, 22 hours), Pavlodar (6700T, 28 to 33 hours, from Almaty-I only), Petropavlovsk (8000T, 31 hours), Semey (3500T, 20 to 22 hours), Shymkent (3000T, 12 to 15 hours), Taraz (2765T, 10½ hours), Turkistan (3200T, 16 hours) and Uralsk (6500T, 54

hours). Trains for Atyrau (6000T, 52 hours) and Mangyshlak (Aktau; 7000T, 67 hours) depart every second day.

For Karaganda and Astana you can take advantage of the Talgo: a sleek, Spanish-built, fast overnight train with lovely clean bathrooms. Unfortunately it can't travel at full speed because the Kazakh track isn't up to that. Train 1 departs Almaty-II just after 7pm (it doesn't stop at Almaty-I), reaching Astana at 8.20am. The one-way fare in 3rd/2nd/1st class to Astana is 9400/15,800/17,300T (2nd class is a two-person compartment).

The only direct train to Moscow (23,000T) is train 7, leaving at 6am on even dates and taking a cool 81 hours via Shymkent, Aqtöbe, Uralsk and Saratov. You can get there half a day quicker by changing trains two or three times en route. There are also direct daily trains to Novosibirsk.

GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

Several buses from the airport run through the city centre (a 30- to 40-minute ride). Check the map to decide which is best. At research time, the nearest bus stop to the airport was 250m along the street outside the parking area. Bus 492 runs to Saykhat bus station, west on Rayymbek, south on Naurzybay Batyr then west on Abay. Going to the airport it heads north on Zheltoqsan instead of Naurzybay Batyr. Bus 79 goes to Saykhat bus station, south on Pushkin, west on Gogol, south on Furmanov, west on Abay and south on Baytursynuly, and vice-versa. Marshrutka 526 goes to Saykhat bus station, south on Pushkin, west on Maqataev, south on Furmanov and southwest on Al-Farabi, and vice-versa. All cost 100T.

A taxi from the airport to the centre shouldn't cost more than 2000T, though drivers may try to get 4000T or 5000T. Going out to the airport you may be able to get a taxi for 1000T. For 1500T, you can call one on ☎ 255 53 33 (24 hours; no English spoken).

Public Transport

Almaty has a vast network of bus, trolleybus, tram and marshrutka (small buses) routes. Fares are usually 40T. They can get very crowded, so if you have much baggage or are short of time, it's simpler to take a taxi.

All services mentioned here follow the same routes in both directions unless stated.

THE BUS STATIONS

From Sayran bus station, buses 37, 94 and 166 run east along Töle Bi to the centre. Buses 94 and 166 turn north on Qonaev, then east on Gogol to Gorky Park. The 37 turns north on Zheltoqsan then east on Rayymbek to Saykhat bus station; going out to Sayran it heads south on Naurzybay Batyr instead of Zheltoqsan. Tram 4 heads east from Sayran along Töle Bi, then south on Baytursynuly, east on Shevchenko, north on Qonaev and east on Maqataev.

Many routes including buses 29, 32, 37, 79 and 492 and marshrutkas 526 and 537 pass Saykhat bus station: just look for one saying 'Saykhat' and heading in the right direction.

THE TRAIN STATIONS

From Almaty-II, trolleybuses 5 and 6 head south on Abylay Khan, then west on Abay to the Central Stadium, Fantasy World and beyond. Marshrutka 537 goes east to Saykhat bus station, south to the Zelyony Bazar (Pushkin), west on Gogol, south on Furmanov then southwest on Al-Farabi.

From Almaty-I, bus 2 and marshrutka 528 run to Saykhat, the Zelyony Bazar (Pushkin) and Gogol then south on Furmanov as far as Ramstor.

OTHER USEFUL ROUTES

In the central area, Furmanov is the main artery for north-south routes, used by buses 2, 63 and 79 and marshrutkas 526, 528 and 537, among others; Gogol and Abay are the principal east-west routes. Tram 4, along Qonaev and Shevchenko, is another useful service.

Bus 29 Saykhat bus station, Pushkin, Kaldayakov, Bögenbay Batyr (Qabanbay Batyr northbound), Dostyq, Butakovka.

Bus 32 Saykhat bus station, Rayymbek, Naurzybay Batyr (Zheltoqsan northbound), Timiryazev.

Bus 35 Abay from Dostyq to Central Stadium, Fantasy World and beyond.

Bus 63 Zelyony Bazar (Pushkin), Gogol, Furmanov, Al-Farabi to Saina.

Bus 66 Gogol (north side of Panfilov Park), Kaldayakov, Dostyq, Abay, Zhandosov.

Bus 139 Zelyony Bazar, Maqataev, Naurzybay Batyr (Zheltoqsan northbound), Abay to Central Stadium.

Marshrutka 500 Zelyony Bazar, Pushkin, Gogol, Kaldayakov, Bögenbay Batyr, Dostyq, Abay, Zhandosov.

Marshrutka 520 Ramstor, Furmanov, Satpaev, southwest on Zhandosov.

Trolleybus 1 Gorky Park, Gogol, south on Auezov to Timiryazev.

Trolleybus 2 Zelyony Bazar (Zhibek Zholy), Pushkin, Gogol, Auezov, west on Abay.

Trolleybus 11 Zelyony Bazar (Zhibek Zholy), Gogol, Kaldayakov, Dostyq, Abay, south on Baytursynuly.

Trolleybus 12 Gorky Park, Gogol, Auezov, southwest on Zhandosov.

Trolleybus 19 Zelyony Bazar (Zhibek Zholy), Gogol, Kaldayakov, Dostyq, Abay to Central Stadium, Fantasy World and beyond.

Taxi

There are some official taxis – marked with chequerboard logos or other obvious signs – but many private cars also act as taxis. Just stand at the roadside with your arm out and you'll rarely have to wait more than six or eight cars before one stops. Say where you're going and how much you're offering. If you can't agree a price, let the car go and wait for another. A ride in the centre of Almaty should cost 200T to 400T, depending on distance (a bit more at night). You can call a cab on ☎ 255 53 33 (24 hours; no English spoken); minimum fare is 500T.

AROUND ALMATY

There are many great excursions to be made from Almaty, notably into the Zailiysky Alatau range climbing south to the Kyrgyzstan border. Easy day trips include Medeu, Chimbulak and Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake. The two main access routes into the Zailiysky Alatau foothills south of the city are the valleys of the Malaya (Little) Almatinka and Bolshaya (Big) Almatinka rivers. See the Almaty to Lake Issyk-Köl map (p132) for an overview of this region. If you're heading high into the mountains, make sure you have a good map and/or a guide. In winter and spring, watch out for avalanches. See the Trekking Warning p134.

Akademkitap No 1 bookshop in Almaty sells a good range of trekking maps covering this area, while GEO sells topographical maps (p116). If you can find it, *The Hiker's Guide to Almaty* by Arkady Pozdveyev outlines 40-odd day hikes and longer around Almaty. See Travel Agencies (p117) and Tourist Information (p117) for some providers of guided trips.

Given the deteriorating state of the roads as you travel east from Almaty, it's better to consider destinations such as the Charyn

Canyon and the Karkara Valley as overnight trips. These are covered in the Southeast Kazakhstan section (p134).

Medeu & Chimbulak

These are Almaty's playgrounds in the Malaya Almatinka valley, both easily visited on a day trip from the city. If you want to avoid crowds come on a weekday.

The winter sports facilities here are good enough for Almaty to have made an (unsuccessful) bid to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics. The settlement of Medeu, at 1700m, is a scattering of buildings around the huge Medeu ice rink, about 15km southeast of central Almaty. Chimbulak at 2300m is Central Asia's top skiing centre. Both are starting points for good day hikes and for treks in the Zailiysky Alatau: see Medeu to Butakovka Hike (opposite) and Trekking to Lake Issyk-Köl (p136) for routes.

Medeu is always several degrees cooler than Almaty, and Chimbulak is cooler still. Except in summer, rain in Almaty means snow and zero visibility at the higher elevations.

The 10,500-sq-metre **Medeu ice rink** (☎ 327-271 62 15; admission adult/under 13yr 600/300T; ⌚ noon-4pm & 6-11pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm & 5-11pm Sat, 10am-4pm & 5-11pm Sun approx Nov-Apr), built in 1972, is made for speed skating and many champion skaters have trained here. Even when the rink is closed people come to relax at the shashlyk and drink stands, and to take a walk in the surrounding valleys and hills. You can rent skates for 600T per two hours, though you need to leave your passport or 10,000T as deposit.

What looks like a dam in the main valley above the ice rink (about 3km by road or 800-odd steps on foot) is actually there to stop avalanches and mudslides. The road climbs a further 4.5km from this barrier to the surprisingly swish **Chimbulak ski resort** (☎ 327-258 19 99; www.chimbulak.com), with a vertical drop of 900m and a variety of ski runs for all levels. The ski season runs from about November to April. A new quad lift was added in 2003 and the ski-rental equipment, including snowboards, is also in good condition, costing 2000T to 5000T per day depending on quality. Day/half-day lift passes are 4000/2500T Monday to Friday, 5000/3000T Saturday and Sunday, with individual lift tickets at 400T. Since it takes three lifts to reach the Talgar Pass at around 3200m, a day pass makes sense if you're going to ski the whole mountain. Ski

MEDEU TO BUTAKOVKA HIKE

The further from Medeu you hike, the prettier the scenery becomes. This trek through the wooded Komissarov (Kim-Asar) Valley and over the 2060m Komissarov Pass can be completed in half a day, or extended to a full day if you continue on the 2870m Butakovka Pass. From Medeu take the paved road heading up the east side of the valley 100m below the ice rink, towards the Qazaq Aul restaurant. Continue up the road until you reach the track that heads past some buildings belonging to the forest service. The trail rises steeply to the Komissarov Pass. From here you can either hike along the north ridge of the Komissarov spur back to Medeu, or head east through a forest leading to a narrow ravine. The trail forks in several places but all routes will eventually bring you to the Butakovka valley. From here you can head up the valley to the Butakovka Pass or down to Butakovka village, where bus 29 returns to Almaty.

Stage One Medeu to Komissarov Pass (two hours).

Stage Two Komissarov Pass to Butakovka valley (two to three hours).

Stage Three Butakovka valley to Butakovka Pass (four hours).

Stage Four Butakovka Pass to Butakovka (two to three hours).

lessons are US\$15 per hour (US\$20 at weekends) in groups of three, or US\$22 (weekends US\$28) for individual lessons. Some instructors speak English.

You can take walks from Chimbulak itself. A track continues 8km up the Malaya Almatinka valley and, in summer, it's a 3km hike up to the Talgar Pass. Warning: there is year-round avalanche danger wherever you see snow. Pik Komsomola (4330m) rises 3km south of the Talgar Pass, the nearest of a ring of glacier-flanked peaks around the top of the Malaya Almatinka valley, which are favourites with Almaty climbers.

If you are staying at Chimbulak, you can entertain yourself in the evening at the modern **bowling alley** (per hr 2000T; ⌚ noon-3am).

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Chimbulak (☎ 327-258 19 99; www.chimbulak.com; r/pol-lux/lux 9000/13,000/30,000T) This lodge at the Chimbulak resort has a great location at the foot of the chairlift, but you'll pay for it through the nose. Most of the rooms are unrenovated and not very exciting, but the *lux* units do have a Jacuzzi. The standard and *pol-lux* rooms go for 5000 and 9000T respectively from about April to November.

Hotel Vorota Tuyuk Su (☎ 327-260 72 15; r with shared bathroom 5200-8700T, with private bathroom from 8700T) Two kilometers up the road past Chimbulak, this handsome stone lodge has 26 comfortable rooms in attractive wooden cottages, plus a restaurant with mainly Russian food, a bathhouse and billiards room – somewhat cosier than Hotel Chimbulak.

Qazaq Aul (Kazakh Village; ☎ 327-271 64 17; dishes 350-650T; ⌚ 11am-midnight) This restaurant inside several traditionally decorated yurts is a treat. Squatting around low tables, you can enjoy local specialities such as *bashbarmak* and *manty*. Take the road up to the left (east) about 100m below the ice rink: the restaurant is 700m up here.

Elsewhere the main food option is shashlyk but there are also a couple of **cafés** (dishes 300-700T) with *plov*, *manty*, soups and salads up at Chimbulak. If you're planning a hike or intend to camp, bring food with you.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Almaty, buses 6 (40T) and 6A (65T) go to Medeu (30 minutes) every few minutes from Dostyq, opposite the Hotel Kazakhstan. The last buses back leave Medeu about 10pm. Taxis from Medeu to Chimbulak cost 1000T to 1500T, or 500T per person on a shared basis.

Bolshoe Almatinskoe Lake Area

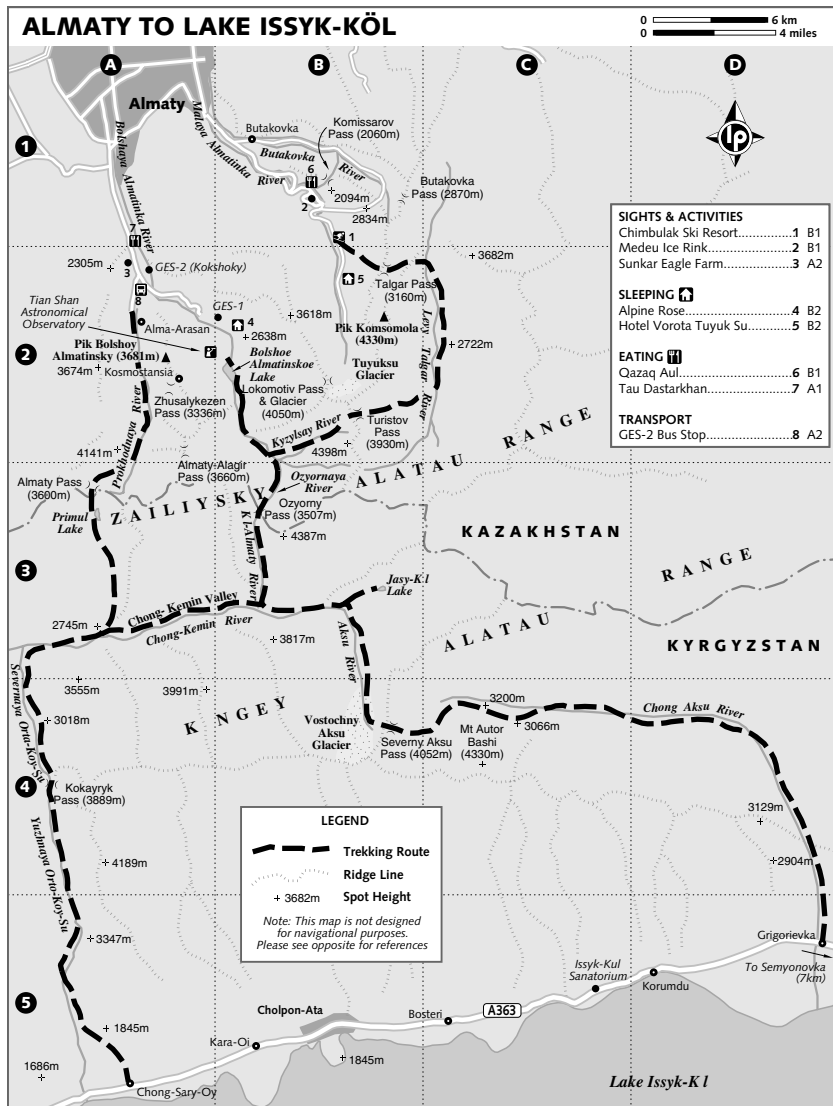
West of the Malaya Almatinka valley lies its 'big sister', the Bolshaya Almatinka valley.

Coming from the city the first thing you will encounter is a gate where a guard collects 200T per person for entry to the Ile-Alatau National Park. The nearby **Sunkar eagle farm** (☎ 327-255 30 76; admission 150T; ⌚ daylight hr), which also keeps hunting dogs, is worth a look. At 4pm except Monday, an entertaining display of several species of trained raptors in flight is staged (1000T). A couple of kilometres further is the bus stop at the GES-2 hydroelectric

station, also called Kokshoky. The road forks here, with the right branch heading to the settlement of Alma-Arasan (4km), and the left branch following the Bolshaya Almatinka River.

The track up the Bolshaya Almatinka valley passes another small hydroelectric station, GES-1, after about 8km, and brings you after

a further 7km or so to the picturesque 1.6km-long **Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake** (2500m), resting in a rocky bowl in the Zailiysky Alatau foothills. The lake is a hike of four or five hours from GES-2, with a rise of nearly 1100m. This is a starting point for many trekking routes in the mountains and across to Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan (p136). The lake is frozen



TREKS FROM THE BOLSHAYA ALMATINKA VALLEY

The GES-2–Kosmostantsia–Alma-Arasan loop is a fine, day-long trek of about 31km. It can be extended to a two- or three-day circuit if you head south from Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake and over the Almaty–Alagir Pass (3660m).

More challenging routes link the Bolshaya Almatinka and Malaya Almatinka valleys. To go from GES-2 to Chimbulak via the Lokomotiv Glacier and Lokomotiv Pass (4050m, Grade 1B), the Tuyuksu Glacier and the Malaya Almatinka River, takes two or three days. See the Trekking Warning, p134.

GES-2–Kosmostantsia–Alma-Arasan Trek

You can start from where the bus stops at GES-2 hydroelectric station, but time and effort will be saved by taking a taxi further to GES-1 (see p134). Here climb the metal steps beside the broad water pipe rising sharply up the gorge, then walk up the pipe for the most direct route to Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake. The road is a more serpentine route to the same place. From the lake, follow the road uphill to the right, past the observatory and up to Kosmostantsia at the head of the Zhusalykezen Pass (3336m). From here a trail runs north to the summit of Pik Bolshoy Almatinsky (3681m), or you can descend to the Prokhodnaya River valley, which runs north to the Alma-Arasan Resort. From here, bus No 93 runs back to the city or you can continue walking back to GES-2.

Stage One GES-2 (Kokshoky) to GES-1 (two hours).

Stage Two GES-1 to Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake (two hours).

Stage Three Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake to Kosmostantsia (three hours).

Stage Four Kosmostantsia to Alma-Arasan (four to five hours).

from November to June and only takes on its famous turquoise tinge once the silt of summer meltwater has drained away. It's a good bird-watching spot, especially during the May migration. A supposed 4WD track heads south from the lake and over the Ozyornyy Pass (3507m) and eventually to Lake Issyk-Köl in Kazakhstan, but at the time of writing this was in impossibly bad condition for motor vehicles, though OK for mountain bikers.

Two kilometres up the track to the west from the lake (about a 40-minute walk), at 2750m, is the outlandish **Tian Shan Astronomical Observatory**, sometimes still referred to by its Soviet-era acronym, Gaish. The observatory has the second-biggest telescope in the former USSR, with magnification of around 600 times, installed in 1991. The telescope only operates at part-capacity due to lack of funding but is still used for research into the active nuclei of galaxies. A former radar dish is now used as a satellite TV receiver. It's possible to stay here (see right) and take tours of the working sections (in Russian) for 500T.

At the head of the Zhusalykezen Pass (3336m), 6km southwest from the observatory, is the **Kosmostantsia**, a group of wrecked buildings belonging to various scientific re-

search institutes. Some research into solar radiation is still carried out here.

SLEEPING & EATING

If you're not camping by the lake, there are a couple of places to stay.

Tian Shan Astronomical Observatory (☎ 327-221 11 44, 327-276 21 67; r per person 3000T) This unique lodging has prime lake and mountain views, though it can be full on weekends from May to September. The rooms have electric heaters for warmth, but if you are looking for a bargain, ask if you can stay in one of the basic wooden cottages (*domick*). There is food here (meals 2500T) and you can ask for a packed lunch if you're hiking.

Alpine Rose (☎ 327-264 03 25; r with shared bathroom 7000T, with private bathroom from 8700T) This mock Swiss chalet-style hotel is halfway between GES-1 and the lake. Rooms are clean and comfortable and the atmospheric bar has house-brewed beer. They also have a *banya* (bathhouse) and billiards room. You can rent snowmobiles here in winter (13,000T per hour).

Tau Dastarkhan (☎ 327-258 35 43) Several places to eat, from roadside shashlyk stands up, are dotted along the road from Almaty to GES-2.

The Tau Dastarkhan group of restaurants, 500m before GES-2, includes Kazakh, Georgian and German eateries, plus pastry and deli cafés, open-air grills and even a pool. Prices are midrange.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From central Almaty, take bus 63 or marshrutka 526 south on Furmanov and along Al-Farabi to the big roundabout on the southern edge of the city where Al-Farabi meets Navoi and Saina. Here switch to bus No 28 or 93 heading up the hill to the south. Both go to GES-2 (Kokshokoy) and bus 93 continues to Alma-Arasan. The last bus back from GES-2 is at about 9.45pm.

The Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake road is normally passable in a 4WD all the way to Kosmostantsia, and in non-4WDs as far as GES-1. An Almaty city taxi will bring you this far for about 1500T.

SOUTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN

The region from Almaty to Lake Balkhash is known as Zhetisu (Russian: Semirechie) meaning Land of Seven Rivers. There are actually more than 800 rivers, many fed by glaciers in the Zailiysky and Zhungar Alatau ranges, making it a rich area for agriculture. There's plenty to see and do in Zhetisu and the mountains along Kazakhstan's borders with Kyrgyzstan and China – a blessing for anyone based in Almaty or whose Kazakhstan travels are restricted to this corner of the country.

ZAILIYSKY ALATAU & KÜNGEY ALATAU ЗАЙЛИЙСКИЙ АЛАТАУ И КУНГЕЙ АЛАТАУ

The Zailiysky Alatau, and the Küngey Alatau further south of Almaty, are spurs of the Tian Shan running east–west between Almaty and Kyrgyzstan's Lake Issyk-Köl.

The mountains are high and beautiful, with many peaks over 4000m, lots of glaciers and Tian Shan firs on the steep valley sides. In summer the valleys are used as summer pasture and herders set up yurt camps. These mountains make for excellent trekking and there are dozens of trails of varying length, many starting from Medeu, Chimbulak, GES-2 or Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake, which

TREKKING WARNING

It's feasible to trek unguided if you have suitable experience and equipment, but take extreme care with the weather. You must be equipped for sudden bad conditions. The trekking season lasts from about mid-May to mid- to late September; July and August have the most reliable weather, but at any time it can often rain or even snow in the mountains, even when it's warm in Almaty. If you're caught unprepared by a sudden storm, it could be fatal.

Check what lies in store before embarking on any trek – some routes cross glaciers and tricky passes over 4000m high. When in doubt, go with a guide.

are easily reached from Almaty (see Around Almaty, p130). Some of the best-used trails go right across to Lake Issyk-Köl. See p117 for recommended Almaty travel agencies offering guided treks.

Passes marked on maps as Unclassified (N/K) or 1A are simple, with slopes no steeper than 30 degrees; glaciers, where they exist, are flat and without open crevasses. Grade 1B passes may have ice patches or glaciers with hidden crevasses and may require ropes. Passes of grade 2A and above may require special equipment and technical climbing skills.

Maps

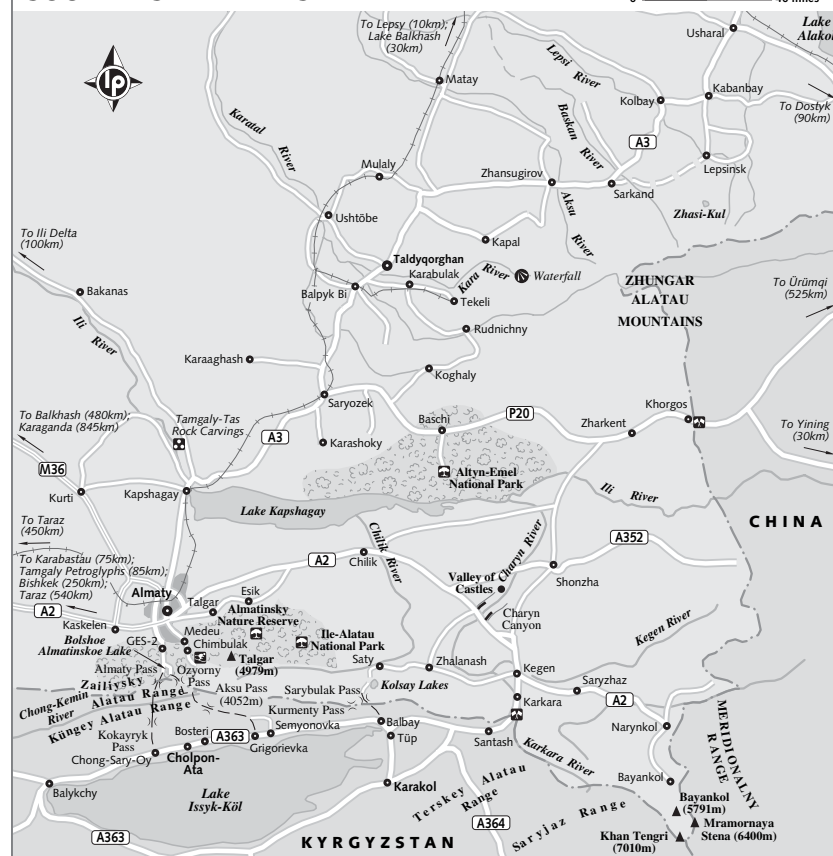
Good Russian-language maps are available in Almaty from Akademkitap and GEO (p116). The *Marshrutnaya Turistskaya Karta* (Tourist Route Map) series (Moscow, 1990–91) covers specific routes in an unusual but workable section-strip format, mostly at 1:50,000. The *Turistskie Marshrutny g. Almaty-oz. Issyk-Kul* map (Astana, 2000) covers the whole area between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl at 1:200,000 and grades all the passes in the region.

KOLSAY LAKES ОЗЁРА КОЛЬСАЙ

These three pretty lakes lie amid the steep, forested foothills of the Küngey Alatau, 110km southeast of Almaty as the crow flies, but over 300km by road via Chilik (Shelek) and Zhalanash. This is the start of a popular trekking route over to Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan.

The lakes are strung along the Kolsay River, about 1800m to 2850m high, southwest of the village of Saty. A minibus to Saty (1200T,

SOUTHEAST KAZAKHSTAN



six hours) leaves Almaty's Saykhat bus station about 8am. Alternatively get a bus to Zhalanash and find a ride for the last 40km to Saty. From Saty it's about 15km by road to the 1km-long Nizhny (Lower) Kolsay lake at 1800m. Midway between Saty and the lake there is a checkpoint where you'll pay a park entrance fee of 1000T per person.

In Saty, **Yelshibay Umbetaliev** (☎ 327-772 77 18; Beregovaya 8; dm incl meals 2500T) has homestay accommodation and can offer walking and horse-riding trips – the EIRC in Almaty (p117) can put you in contact with him. You should be able to hire a horse and/or guide in Saty for around US\$30 per day.

Jibek Joly (p117) has a spartan, six-room wooden guesthouse overlooking Nizhny Kol-

say lake, for which it quotes US\$25 per person full board, though travellers who arrived here independently reported being asked US\$35 without meals. Cheaper cottages lower down cost 1000T to 1500T per person (though the same travellers also reported being charged extortionate prices for food by an irascible village administrator while staying here). Camping by the lake is 750T per tent.

The Sredny (Middle) Kolsay lake is the biggest and most beautiful, 5km from the lower lake via a hike of about three hours rising to 2250m. The surrounding meadows are used as pasture and are a good camping spot. From the Sredny lake to the smaller Verkhny (Upper) Kolsay lake at 2850m is about 4km and takes about three hours.

The route over to Lake Issyk-Köl continues 6km from here to the 3274m Sarybulak Pass on the Küngey Alatau ridge (also the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border), and descends to the village of Balbay (Saray-Bulak) near Issyk-Köl. By horse, this can be done in one day; on foot it will take two days. An alternative longer route goes by the more westerly Kurmenty Pass. Agents offering treks on these routes include Karlygash Makatova (who quotes US\$200 per person for a three-day trip starting from Almaty,

based on group size of six; see p118) and Tour Asia (see p118).

CHARYN CANYON ЧАРЫНСКИЙ КАНЬОН

The Charyn (Sharyn) River, flowing rapidly down from the Tian Shan, has carved a 150m- to 300m-deep canyon into the otherwise flat and barren steppe some 200km east of Almaty, and time has weathered this into all sorts of weird and colourful rock formations, especially in the branch canyon known as the

TREKKING TO LAKE ISSYK-KÖL

Before setting off on these treks make sure you have good maps and, better still, go with a guide. You will need to bring all food and camping equipment. The two most used routes run from Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake to Grigorievka or Semyonovka on Lake Issyk-Köl (35km and 42km east of Cholpon-Ata respectively); and from GES-2 to Chong-Sary-Oy on Lake Issyk-Köl (15km west of Cholpon-Ata). There are several more easterly routes, including from the Kolsay lakes (p134). See p294 for more information on the Lake Issyk-Köl area.

All the routes summarised below pass through the Chong-Kemin valley, a summer pasture for yurt-dwellers between the main ridges of the Zailiysky Alatau and Küngey Alatau (see p293). Jasy-Kül Lake towards the upper (eastern) end of the valley, at 3200m, is one of the most stunningly beautiful spots in these mountains.

If you plan to stay in Kyrgyzstan you'll need a Kyrgyz visa, but there are no border posts on these routes to get your passport stamped. Consult a trekking agency before setting off on the best way to handle this.

For maps covering these routes see p134.

Bolshoe Almatinskoe Lake to Grigorievka

This route takes four to six days. Head from Bolshoe Almatinskoe lake (2500m), up the Ozyornaya river to the Ozyorny Pass (3507m) and on the Zailiysky Alatau main ridge. Travel down the Köl-Almaty River to the Chong-Kemin River (2800m). Trek east up the Chong-Kemin Valley to Jasy-Kül lake. Then head back west down the Chong-Kemin Valley to the Aksu River. Next hike south up the Aksu River and the Vostochny (Eastern) Aksu Glacier to the Severny (Northern) Aksu Pass (4052m, on the Küngey Alatau main ridge) before heading eastward down to the Chong Aksu River, to the foot of 4330m Mt Autor Bashi. Finally follow the river eastward, then southward to Grigorievka.

Variation from Chimbulak

Three days can be added to the preceding route by going from Chimbulak, across the Talgar (Bolshoe Talgarsky) Pass (3160m) and down to the Levy Talgar River (2300m). Follow the Levy Talgar River south then head west up the Turistov River to Turistov Pass (3930m). Next trek southwest down the Kyzylsay River to the Ozyornaya river. From here travel up the Ozyornaya river to Ozyorny Pass then continue as on the preceding route.

GES-2 to Chong-Sary-Oy

This is a more westerly route of about six days. From GES-2, head south through Alma-Arasan and up the Prokhodnaya valley to the Almaty (Prokhodnoy) Pass (3600m) on the Zailiysky Alatau main ridge. Trek south past Primul Lake below the pass and down the Almaty River to the Chong-Kemin River (2700m). From here, go west down the Chong-Kemin River then south up the Severnaya (Northern) Orto-Koy-Su River to the Kokayryk Pass (3889m), on the Küngey Alatau main ridge. Finally head south down the Yuzhnaya (Southern) Orto-Koy-Su River to Chong-Sary-Oy.

Valley of Castles. This is no Grand Canyon, but it's worth a visit. Although the canyon can be visited in a long day trip from Almaty, overnight camping (free) offers a more relaxed pace. April, May, June, September and October are the best months to come: it's too hot in summer. It costs 208T per person to enter the canyon area.

To get here, take a bus from Almaty's Sayakhat bus station heading to Kegen or Narynkol. The buses cross the Charyn River just upstream from the canyon, which is as close as you can get by road; ask to be let out as close as possible to the canyon. From here it's 12km by dirt road to the Valley of Castles, which is around 5km long and up to 50m deep. If you're lucky you might get a taxi or lift there; if not, it's a walk!

Don't try to swim in the river, which is deceptively fast.

Many Almaty travel agencies offer trips to Charyn Canyon. The EIRC (p117) offers weekend day-trips by bus for 1500T per person; CATC charges around 45,000T for up to 20 people; a taxi goes for around US\$200.

KARKARA VALLEY КАРКАРАНСКАЯ ДОЛИНА

The beautiful, broad valley of the Karkara River, 200km east of Almaty, is an age-old summer pasture for herds from both sides of what's now the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border. The river forms the border for some 40km before heading north to join the Kegen River, beyond which it becomes the Charyn.

From Kegen, 250km by road across the steppe from Almaty, a scenic road heads south to Karkara, then to the border post about 28km from Kegen. The road, normally open from about April to October, then veers west towards Tüp and Lake Issyk-Köl in Kyrgyzstan. No public transport reaches the border, but several daily minibuses run to Kegen (800T, three to four hours) from Almaty's Sayakhat bus station, and from Kegen you can get up the valley and into Kyrgyzstan by hitching or taxi. At Santash, 19km into Kyrgyzstan, you can find a bus or shared jeep to Tüp or Karakol.

A *chabana* (cowboy) festival, with a market, traditional foods and sports such as *kökpar* (see Buzkashi, p59) and *kyz kuu* (where a man chases a woman on horseback), is held on the Kazakh side of the border for two or three days around 10–15 August each year. It brings together Kazakh and Kyrgyz herders in a re-

minder of the valley's historic role as a meeting place of nomads and Silk Road traders.

Mountain-tourism company Kan Tengri (p118) maintains a summer base camp at about 2200m on the Kazakh side of the international border. Primarily a staging post for treks and climbing expeditions to the central Tian Shan, the camp also offers accommodation to all comers. Accommodation is in tents, with hot showers, a café and bar; full board costs US\$45. It's open from late June to late August. It's possible to join helicopter flights to the central Tian Shan from here, but you may need a border-zone permit for this, so ask ahead.

For information on the Kyrgyz side of the Karkara Valley, see left.

CENTRAL TIAN SHAN ЦЕНТРАЛЬНЫЙ ТЯНЬ ШАНЬ

Kazakhstan's highest and most magnificent mountains rise in the country's far south-eastern corner where it meets Kyrgyzstan and China. Mt Khan Tengri (7010m) on the Kyrgyz border is widely considered the most beautiful and demanding peak in the Tian Shan, and there are many more 5000m-plus peaks around it in all three countries, including Mramornaya Stena (Marble Wall, 6400m) on the Kazakh–Chinese border, and Pik Pobedy (7439m) south of Khan Tengri on the Kyrgyz–Chinese border.

Khan Tengri is flanked by two long, west-running glaciers, the North Inylchek Glacier on its Kazakh side and the South Inylchek glacier on its Kyrgyzstan side.

The Almaty-based mountain-tourism firms Kan Tengri and Tour Asia (p118) offer a variety of exciting one- to five-week treks and full-scale mountaineering expeditions in and around this area in July and August, using tent base camps on the two Inylchek glaciers and at Bayankol (Ak-Kol) to the north, all at altitudes of around 4000m. Access is often by helicopter, using the Karkara Valley base camp as a staging and acclimatisation post. With Kan Tengri, a typical two-week trek costs around €1000, while a three-week trek with a bit of 'easy' climbing should be around €1400. Check the companies' websites for current offerings. Many treks include helicopter flights around the main peaks and glacier hikes to the foot of Khan Tengri and/or Pik Pobedy. Kan Tengri (p118) even offers heli-skiing trips with descents from peaks as high as 5800m. Karlygash Makatova (p118) can arrange two-day

flying visits with a night at one of the Inylchek camps and a Khan Tengri fly-past.

See p312 for information on the Kyrgyz part of the Central Tian Shan.

LAKE KAPSHAGAY & THE ILI RIVER ОЗЕРО КАПЧАГАЙ И РЕКА ИЛИ

Lake Kapshagay is a 100km-long reservoir formed by a hydroelectric dam on the Ili River near the town of Kapshagay, 70km north of Almaty. Many Almaty residents have *dacha* (country or holiday houses) here and the lake has cold, fresh water. Its best beaches are on the north shore, past the dam. Kapshagay is about to become the Kazakh Las Vegas, if government plans announced in 2006 go ahead: all the country's casinos are to be relocated here or to Burabay, north of Astana.

The **Ili River** flows west out of China into the lake, then northwest to Lake Balkhash. The river is navigable by kayak all the way from lake to lake (around 460km), and by raft at least some of the way, and is warm enough for swimming in summer. Around 25km downstream from Kapshagay are the **Tamgaly-Tas rock carvings**, a group of six striking Buddha or Shiva figures with Sanskrit-like inscriptions carved into the rock in about the 8th century AD – rare evidence of early Buddhist or Hindu influence in Kazakhstan. A set of runic-type inscriptions on other rocks nearby are not nearly so old – they were carved for the making of a Kazakh film, *Kyz-Zhibek* (Silk Girl), in the 1950s. Almaty agencies will bring you to the carvings by road or a road-kayak combination. Karlygash Makatova (p118) does day trips starting at US\$55 per person with kayaking.

As it approaches Lake Balkhash, the Ili enters a delta wetland region of many lakes, marshes and thick, junglelike vegetation – with great fishing for catfish, carp, zander, bream and other species. Kan Tengri (p118) has a fishing camp with comfortable bungalows in the Ili delta. For an enthusiastic account of fishing here visit www.thisstravel.co.uk and type 'Kazakhstan' in the search box.

Buses run to Kapshagay town (200T, 1½ hours) every half-hour, 7.30am to 9pm, from Almaty's Sayran bus station.

TAMGALY PETROGLYPHS ПЕТРОГЛИФЫ ТАМГАЛЫ

Not to be confused with the Tamgaly-Tas rock carvings (above), the Tamgaly petroglyphs are the most impressive of many petroglyph groups

in southeastern Kazakhstan and one of only two Kazakhstan sites on the Unesco World Heritage List. Situated in a lushly vegetated canyon in an otherwise arid region near Karabastau, 170km northwest of Almaty, they number 5000 separate carvings from the Bronze Age and later, in several groups. The varied images include sun-headed idols, women in childbirth, bull sacrifice, hunting scenes and a big variety of animals, and are best seen in the afternoon when most sunlight reaches them. The Tamgaly canyon has been a ritual site for nomadic peoples since at least the second half of the 2nd millennium BC and there are also ancient burial mounds here. Many Almaty agencies run day trips here: bus trips offered by the EIRC (p117) are 1300T per person.

ZHARKENT ЖАРКЕНТ

pop 34,000

Zharkent (formerly Panfilov), on the northern fringe of the Ili valley, is the last real town in Kazakhstan on the bus route to China (see p183 for border information). The area has a high Uyghur population.

There is little to see here except the **Yuldashiev Mosque**, named for the Uyghur migrant who initiated it. Like Almaty's Zenkov Cathedral, the mosque is built without metal nails, but the curious design incorporates a minaret in the form of a Chinese pagoda beside a more conventional Central Asian dome, with gates in the style of the Timurid epoch. And adding to the cross-cultural symbolism, the mosque's ground-floor windows look Russian.

TALDYQORGHAN ТАЛДЫКОРГАН

☎ 3282 / pop 110,000

The surprise transfer in 2001 of the *oblyst* (regional or provincial) capital from Almaty to smaller Taldyqorghana (Russian: Taldykurgan) breathed new life into this previously declining town. It's now quite a bustling place with attractive, wide, central streets and a leafy central park on Abay. Situated 265km north-east of Almaty, Taldyqorghana is chiefly of interest to visitors as a staging post to Lepsinsk and the Zhungar Alatau mountains, as well as the southern shore of Lake Balkhash.

Orientation & Information

The Almaty–Semey highway runs roughly west–east through town under the name Zhansugirov. Birzhan Sal, Aqyn Sara and Abay head north off this into the centre, crossing

partly pedestrianised Tauelsizdik, the main street, after 400m, and Kabanbay Batyr one block further north. The regional government building and the palace of culture flank the central square on Tauelsizdik, between Abay and Aqyn Sara. The bus station is 1km south of Zhansugirov, along Shevchenko.

Halyk Bank (Abay) Has an ATM.

Kazkommertsbank (cnr Tauelsizdik & Aqyn Sara) Has an ATM.

Qazaqtelekom (Aqyn Sara 137; ☎ 8am–11pm, internet 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–2pm Sat) You can phone and use the internet here.

Sights

If you have time to kill, check out the busy daily **market** (cnr Abay & Gaukhar-Ana), a block north of Kabanbay Batyr, and have a look at the **Regional Museum** (Abay 245; ☎ 9am–1pm & 2–6pm Tue–Sun). The leafy **Central Park** on Abay is pleasant.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kus-Zholy (☎ 22 14 32; Zhansugirov; r 4500–6000T) Lovely big rooms with bathroom, big beds, ornate furnishings, multichannel TV and phone. It's not central though, 2.3km west of the corner of Abay.

Hotel Sulu Tör (☎ 27 24 19; fax 27 22 28; Kabanbay Batyr; r 5000–13,000T; 🍴 📺) Excellent new central hotel with Chinese-inspired décor, just south of Abay. All rooms have good bathrooms with glassed-in showers, heating/aircon and big TVs. Has a restaurant and internet (per hour 300T) too.

Café Dos (☎ 24 30 35; Tauelsizdik 85A; dishes 150–300T; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Shashlyk, steaks, *manty*, chicken, salads and drinks are served to the accompaniment of music videos in this unmissable brick castle. The interior is decorated with reproduction medieval weapons, sets of antlers and a full suit of armour.

Restoran Parliament (dishes 200–400T; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Next door to Hotel Kus-Zholy this has mainly Russian dishes and turns into a disco on weekend evenings.

Hessen Pub (☎ 27 22 17; Aqyn Sara 137; dishes 200–600T; 🍴 noon–2am) This German-style beer hall is the best place to eat in the centre, with an extensive menu of salads, soups and meat dishes. An unobtrusive rock/pop band plays in the evenings.

Getting There & Around

Buses run about hourly round the clock to Almaty (700T, six hours), and two or three

times daily to Zharkent (900T, six hours), Semey (2160T, 17 hours) and Ust-Kamenogorsk (2060T, 16 hours). Shared taxis and minibuses leave from outside the stations when they have a load: to Almaty, shared taxis take about three hours for 2000T per passenger. There's a train station next to the bus station but Taldyqorghana is off the main Turkish railway line.

Marshrutka 13 (30T) runs up and down Zhansugirov and into centre along Aqyn Sara. Marshrutka and bus 7 go along Shevchenko from Zhansugirov to the bus station.

LEPSINSK ЛЕПСИНСК

pop 2000

This quaint and tranquil farming village lies 1020m high at the foot of the Zhungar Alatau mountains which lie along the Chinese border. Lepsinsk's homestay programme, operating from May to September, makes it an ideal base for exploring this beautiful and little-visited range with its thick forests, mountain lakes, abundant wildlife (including bears, wolves, maral deer and many raptors), glaciers and several snowy peaks over 4000m. The wildflowers in the Lepsinsk valley in June and July are spectacular. This is a border zone so you need a border-zone permit (5000T), which takes 20 to 30 days to obtain (or 25,000T for one-week processing), so be sure to plan ahead. Contact the EIRC in Almaty (p117) to organise the permit and also to make arrangements for your visit.

Though no longer a Soviet-style collective, Lepsinsk farmers still tend their many cattle on a cooperative basis, with groups of two or three horsemen taking daily turns to watch over the animals as they graze the steppe outside the village.

Activities

Good one-day outings by foot or horse include to Lepsinsk Canyon, with a rushing river and a beach for relaxing, swimming and fishing, and Muslim's Honey Farm, where you can taste fresh honey and explore the surrounding countryside. A longer trek or ride of two to three days, camping overnight, goes up to Zhasi-Kul, a mountain lake with a magical green colour 24km from the village. Treks of five to 10 days high into the Zhungar Alatau are also possible. Guides keep their eyes and ears open for wildlife as you

go. Prices per day are: guide, 2000T; horse, 1500T; camping equipment, 600T; trekking provisions, 600T.

Sleeping & Eating

Homestay accommodation with three meals is a very reasonable 2000T per person: you'll probably be housed in the cosy and welcoming home of the homestay coordinator, Sabir Mikhalyov, and enjoy excellent meals made almost entirely with local ingredients.

Getting There & Away

The jumping-off point for Lepsinsk is Kabanbay (also known by its former name Andreevka), 250km northeast of Taldyqorghan on the road to Usharal and Semey. Buses to Kabanbay (1440T, 11 hours) leave Almaty's Sayran bus station seven times daily. It's a good idea to get an overnight service such as the 9.15pm departure. There are also nine daily buses (740T, five hours) from Taldyqorghan to Kabanbay, plus faster minibuses (1000T) and shared taxis (1200T). If you're coming from the north, Almaty-bound buses from Semey and Ust-Kamenogorsk will stop at Kabanbay (around 1700T and 11 hours from either place).

Buses leave Kabanbay for the 45km ride up to Lepsinsk (200T, one hour) at 6.15am and 3.45pm Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, returning at 8am and 5pm the same days. A taxi should be 1500T, or 500T per person if shared.

LAKE BALKHASH ОЗЕРО БАЛХАШ

You'll get glimpses of the western end of central Asia's fourth-largest lake if you travel by road or train from Almaty to Astana, but if you want to visit the lake, nicer places are found on its southern shore, accessible from Taldyqorghan. The Karatal River has excellent fishing, especially in the remote region where it flows into Lake Balkhash. You can get there from Ushtëbe by taxi. Some of the best beaches are at the salty eastern end of the lake, 20km north of the train depot of **Lepsy**. There are about 10 summer guesthouses here charging 500T to 1000T per night including meals, although locals bring their own food and cook. The season lasts from mid-June to the end of August; at other times it's likely to be completely boarded up. Lepsy can be reached by train, or by bus from Taldyqorghan (550T, three hours).

Balkhash covers 17,400 sq km, but is only 26m at its deepest point. There are fears that

it may be suffering an Aral Sea-type shrinkage because of interference with the flow of the Ili River, its main water source, upstream from the lake. By some accounts Balkhash's water level has fallen by as much as 2m in 30 years. Critics blame the Kapshagay hydroelectric dam and diversion of the Ili's waters in China.

SOUTHERN KAZAKHSTAN

This is the most Kazakh part of Kazakhstan: Kazakhs are generally the great majority in the population, having been settled here in large numbers during Soviet collectivisation. It's a fascinatingly varied region whose chief attractions begin in the Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve with its pristine mountain country, great hiking and horse riding and good-value homestays. Shymkent is the region's atmospheric main city. At Turkistan the Mausoleum of Kozha Akhmed Yasau is Kazakhstan's most sacred Muslim shrine and a magnificent piece of Timurid architecture.

TARAZ ТАРАЗ

☎ 3262 / pop 360,000

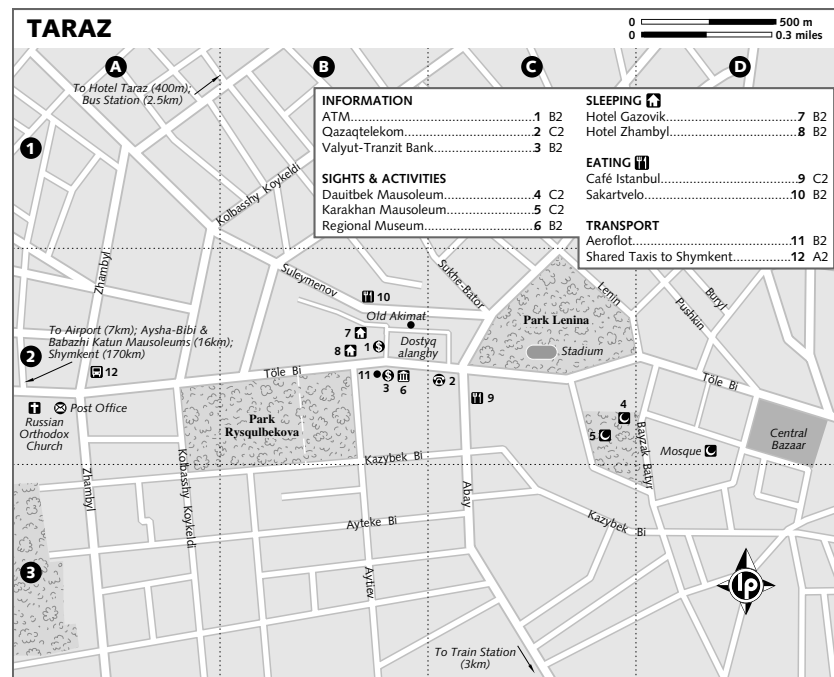
Ask any Kazakh what they know about Taraz and they'll probably say 'vodka' as this is where the country's favourite brand is produced. It's a quiet, Soviet-style place with leafy boulevards and one excellent museum.

Medieval Taraz reached its peak in the 11th and 12th centuries as a wealthy Silk Road stop and capital of the Turkic Karakhanid state which also ruled Bukhara for a while. Levelled by Jenghiz Khan, it didn't resurface until the 19th century when the Kokand khanate re-founded it as a northern frontier town.

The Soviet regime settled many internal exiles here, renamed the town Dzhambul after the locally-born Kazakh bard Zhambyl Zhabaev and added phosphate factories to pump up the economy. Since independence, the name has changed again and the factories have closed, which has at least cleaned up the air.

Orientation & Information

The meeting of east-west Töle Bi with north-south Abay is the centre of town. West from here a government square, Dostyq alanghy, stretches along Töle Bi.



ATM (Qarzhly Ministriligi, Dostyq alangi) In lobby of Finance Ministry building.

Qazaqtelemek (☎ 45 38 54; Abay 124; internet per hr 150T; ☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun) You can also phone from here (24 hours).

Valyut-Tranzit Bank (☎ 45 66 11; Töle Bi 59; ☎ 24hr) Has an exchange office.

Sights

Taraz' **Regional Museum** (☎ 23 25 85; Töle Bi 55; admission 150T; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) was completely renovated for the city's 2000th anniversary celebrations in 2002 and is one of the best local museums in the country. Its pride and joy is the domed rear building housing an impressive collection of *balbals*, totemlike stones bearing the carved faces of honoured warriors or chieftains, dating from the 6th to 9th centuries AD. Nomadic early Turks left these monuments at many sacred sites in southern Kazakhstan.

Two small mausoleums in a wooded park near the town centre, both 20th-century reconstructions, are worth a look. The 12th-century **Karakhan Mausoleum** marks the grave of a revered Karakhanid potentate known

as Karakhan or Aulie-Ata (Holy Father). The **Dautibek Mausoleum**, for a 13th-century Mongol viceroy, is said to have been built lopsided in revenge for the man's infamous cruelty. Both buildings are Islamic shrines today.

Look in the sprawling **Central Bazaar** (Töle Bi) for inexpensive Chinese silk and some Central Asian crafts. Buses 2 and 16 run along Töle Bi from Park Lenina.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Taraz (☎ 43 34 91; Zhambyl 75A; s 2000-4500T, d 2800-7000T) The cheap option, though inconveniently placed halfway between the bus station and city centre (about 2km from each), Hotel Taraz has simple but adequate rooms, friendly staff and a bar and restaurant. From the bus station, buses 10 and 26 pass by; from the train station you can take marshrutka 077.

Hotel Zhambyl (☎ 45 25 52; fax 45 17 50; Töle Bi 42; s 4690-7860T, d 8640-10,910T) Rather stern desk staff but comfortable rooms with bathroom, phone, TV and fridge, and you get the room for 24 hours.

Hotel Gazovik (☎ 43 32 33; www.gazovik.kz; Suleymenov 7A-1; s 7500-17,000T, d 11,000/19,200T; 🍴) The best hotel is a modern, 20-room affair just off the central square. The good, carpeted rooms boast paintings, international satellite TV and bathtub. Reception staff speak some English and has a good Russian-European restaurant, with dishes for 400T to 600T, is downstairs. Breakfast is included in the rates.

Café Istanbul (☎ 45 25 29; Abay 117; dishes 200-500T; ☎ 11am-10pm) Small Turkish café serving excellent doners and kebabs.

Sakartvelo (☎ 45 73 82; Suleymenov 16; dishes 400-800T; ☎ noon-midnight) Large and freshly cooked Georgian meals including grilled chicken and a variety of salads, in a cute wood-and-stone building with some outdoor seating.

Getting There & Away

Taraz' **Aulie-Ata Airport** (☎ 45 08 94), 8km from the centre off the Shymkent road, has a few flights a week to Astana (12,000T), Almaty (13,000T), Kyzylorda (11,000T) and Atyrau (21,000T). **Aeroflot** (☎ 45 69 50; Töle Bi 61; ☎ 9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-3pm Sat) sells air and train tickets.

A good way to get here from Almaty is on the daily 6.15pm train 11 (2765T). It arrives in Taraz at 4.45am and continues to Shymkent (700T). Train 12 to Almaty leaves at 10.58pm. The station is on Baluan Shcholak about 4km south of the centre.

Numerous buses leave around 10pm from Almaty (1100T, nine hours) from the bus station on Zhambyl, 4km northeast of the centre, and from the train station. Marshrutkas (1200T, eight or nine hours) and shared taxis (3000T, six hours) to Almaty leave from the bus station during daytime. Marshrutkas to Shymkent (500T, three hours) and Bishkek (500T, five hours) also leave from the bus station. Shared taxis to Shymkent (1200T, 2½ hours) wait on Zhambyl just north of Töle Bi.

Getting Around

From the train station, bus and marshrutka 040 run to Abay, Kazybek Bi and Töle Bi in the centre, and bus 47 heads up Abay to the corner of Töle Bi. From the bus station marshrutkas 46 and 032 head to the same intersection, while bus 26 and marshrutka 029 run along Zhambyl to the intersection with Töle Bi.

AROUND TARAZ Aysha-Bibi & Babazhi Katun Mausoleums

Near Aysha-Bibi village, 16km west of Taraz on the Shymkent road, are the tombs of two 11th- or 12th-century women, legendary protagonists of a Kazakhstani *Romeo and Juliet* tale. The main façade of the **Mausoleum of Aysha-Bibi** is probably the only authentically old building around Taraz. Made of delicate terracotta bricks in more than 50 different motifs forming some lovely patterns, the building looks almost weightless. The story goes that Aysha, daughter of a famed scholar named Khakim-Ata, fell in love with Karakhan, the lord of Taraz, but Aysha's father forbade them to marry. The lovers swore a secret pact and Aysha eventually set off for Taraz with her companion Babazhi Katun. Within sight of Taraz, Aysha collapsed from exhaustion/sickness/snake bite (versions differ); Babazhi Katun rushed to Karakhan, who raced to his beloved just in time to marry her before she expired. Karakhan had her beautiful tomb built on the spot, adding later the **Mausoleum of Babazhi Katun**, with its unusual pointed, fluted roof. Today the site is an obligatory stop for local wedding groups to pray and take photos.

A sign points to the mausoleums about 300m south from the main road in the village. Shymkent-bound marshrutkas will take you to Aysha-Bibi or you can hire a taxi in Taraz.

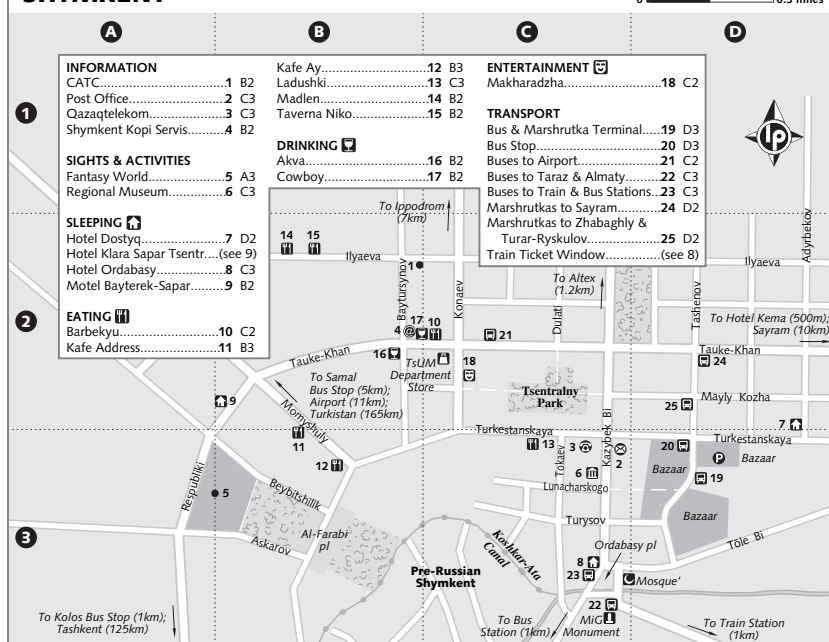
SHYMKENT ШЫМКЕНТ

☎ 3252 / pop 500,000

South Kazakhstan's most vibrant city, with a booming bazaar and lively downtown, Shymkent has more of a Central Asian buzz on its leafy streets than anywhere else in the country. Stop here to soak up the atmosphere, eat well and cheaply, and head out to nearby places of interest including Turkistan, Sayram, Otrar and the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve.

The Mongols razed a minor Silk Road stop here; the Kokand khanate built a frontier fort in the 19th century; Russia took it in 1864; and the whole place was rebuilt in Soviet times. Shymkent smelts lead, makes cigarettes and refines oil, but it's best known for Kazakhstan's best beer, Shymkentskoe Pivo. The population today is about half Kazakh, a quarter Russian and 15% Uzbek.

SHYMKENT



Mosquitoes are an irritant from late June to late July.

Orientation

Shymkent's main central streets are north-south Kazybek Bi and east-west Tauke-Khan and Turkestanskaya. The bus and train stations are both about 1km south of Ordabasy ploshchad, a busy intersection at the south end of Kazybek Bi.

Information

You'll find ATMs at TSUM department store and the Qazaqtelekom office.

Altex (☎ 53 54 93; Kazybek Bi 119) Trips to Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve, Turkistan and Otrar, by Shamil Rafikov, who speaks some English.

CATC (☎ 21 14 36; cat-chimkent@alarnet.com; Ilyayeva 18/217) Local branch of one of Kazakhstan's best travel and air-ticket agencies.

Qazaqtelekom (Turkestanskaya 18; internet per hr 150T; ☎ 10am-8pm) You can also phone and use ATMs here, 24 hours.

Shymkent Kopi Servis (☎ 21 21 75; Baytursynov 8; internet per hr 150T; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Public internet facility – the sign says 'Copy X Grand'.

Sights

The **Regional Museum** (☎ 53 02 22; Kazybek Bi 13; admission 100T; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) has excellent exhibits on Shymkent's history as a caravan town, plus material on old Otrar and Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve, and, on the newly renovated upper-floor, displays on the Russian and Soviet eras.

The **bazaar** (Tashenov; ☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sun) is Shymkent's biggest show, a bustling market spilling over with fresh produce, spices, bread, cheap clothes, mechanical spare parts and kitchen utensils as well as some gaudy traditional costumes and less-portable wooden chests with colourful stamped-tin decoration.

Fantasy World (Tekhnopark; Respublik; rides 50-300T; ☎ 3-11pm Mon-Fri, 11am-11pm Sat & Sun), opposite the Hotel Shymkent, is a popular amusement park and evening hang-out. To its southeast is the ceremonial square **Al-Farabi ploshchad** with landmark clock tower and giant TV screen. Southeast from Al-Farabi, across the small Koshkar-Ata canal, you will find the few remaining streets of **pre-Russian Shymkent**.

Festivals & Events

Shymkent's Nauryz celebrations, on 22 March, are among the biggest in the country. *Kökpar*, horse races, horseback wrestling and *kyz kuu* all happen at the Ippodrom (Hippodrome) on the northern edge of the city.

Sleeping

Hotel Bayterek-Sapar (☎ 33 75 55; fax 23 21 21; Respubliki 4; s 2900-3900T, d 3500-4500T; ☒) Excellent, large, modern, nonsmoking rooms with satellite TV, inside the upmarket Klara-Tsentr-Sapar shopping mall. The shared bathrooms are spotless.

Hotel Ordabasy (☎ 53 64 21; fax 53 70 78; Kazybek Bi 1; s 3000-5700T, d 4300-7000T; ☒) This is a good semibudget option with amiable staff, although the streetside rooms get traffic noise. All rooms are a good size, with bathroom, multichannel satellite TV, and breakfast is included. No long-distance calls from the phones, though.

Hotel Dostyq (☎ 53 99 73; fax 54 59 92; Adyrbekov; s/d from 4500/5500T; ☒) The rooms aren't as spiffy as the lobby but they're modern and quite OK, with satellite TV, apricot paint, air-conditioning and breakfast. The hotel has a small business centre with internet access.

Hotel Klara Sapar Tsentr (☎ 23 23 33; saporhtl@mail.ru; Respubliki 4; s 5900-8900T, d 7400-10,400T; ☒) Bright new hotel with good, English-speaking service. Rooms boast satellite TV and paintings of local scenes, and rates include an hour in the sauna. The hotel has a small business centre with internet access.

Hotel Kema (☎ 54 03 44; fax 54 05 97; Tauke-Khan 93A; s/d from 8320/8840T; ☒) Though a little out of the centre, this is a good upmarket option with well-furnished rooms.

Eating

Kafe Ay (☎ 53 43 05; Momysuly 1; dishes 60-100T; ☒ 11am-7pm) A great place if you want to stuff yourself with excellent, inexpensive shashlyk, *plov* and *laghman*.

Madlen (Ilyaeva 17; coffees & desserts 90-250T; ☒ 10am-midnight) Great coffee house with delicious cakes and desserts, and pavement tables too.

Ladushki (Turkestanskaya 12; main dishes around 100T; ☒ 9am-9.15pm) With décor like a kids' restaurant, Ladushki is actually a highly popular cafeteria where you can get a serve of *manty* for 30T or three pastries and a coffee for under 100T.

Kafe Address (☎ 53 43 00; Momysuly 3; dishes 120-450T; ☒ 10am-midnight) Terrific, bright, Turkish

café, rapidly serving *pide*, shashlyk, doner, kofta, *plov*, soups, moussaka and more, including plenty of vegetarian options.

Taverna Niko (☎ 21 34 58; Ilyaeva 17; dishes 300-550T; ☒ 11am-midnight) Relaxed small restaurant with good Russian-cum-international fare including filet mignon and lamb curry. There's a sushi section too.

Barbekyu (☎ 21 20 12; Tauke-Khan 11; mains 300-700T; ☒ 11am-midnight) With mounds of shashlyk and big salads, Barbekyu is a meat-lover's delight, and the ambience is pleasing with a little glass-roofed interior garden.

Shymkent's numerous *chaikhanas* are good for inexpensive shashlyk, soups, tea and sometimes beer. Look for the shashlyk grills out front.

Drinking & Entertainment

Shymkent doesn't really buzz as you might hope by night. People get married young in these parts then stay home after dark.

Look for 'razlivnoe pivo' signs to track downtown draught Shymkentskoe Pivo. The best downtown watering holes are the dark little **Cowboy** (Tauke-Khan 11; ☒ to midnight), with draft beer and photos of Bob Marley and Marilyn Monroe, and **Akva** (Tauke-Khan 8; ☒ to 3am), with a quirky maritime theme.

The newest hot spot is **Makharadzha** (Maharajah; ☎ 53 52 91; Konaev), with eye-catching neon out front. Here you'll find bowling, billiards (both open 11am to 2.30am) and a glitzy nightclub (men 1500T to 2000T, women 500T to 1000T; open 10pm to 4am) playing a complete mix of Western, Russian, Kazakh and Turkish pop and hip-hop.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Flights from the **airport** (☎ 53 52 95), 12km north-west of the centre, go daily to Almaty (20,000T) and Astana (18,000T), and twice weekly to Aktau (21,000T), Kyzylorda (11,000T), Atyrau (17,000T) and Moscow (47,000T).

BUS, MARSHRUTKA & TAXI

Fleets of large, comfortable buses leave for Taraz and Almaty at 7pm from outside the train station and from beneath the MiG fighter plane monument opposite Ordabasy ploshchad. You can book seats earlier in the day: to Almaty they cost between 800T and 1500T depending on the bus and whether you sit near the front (more expensive) or back.

From the **bus station** (☎ 54 01 66), buses leave for Turkistan (250T, three hours, about hourly 9am to 6pm), Almaty (900T to 1000T, 12 hours, at 4pm, 6pm and 7pm), Karaganda (2760T, 20 hours, 11am), Astana (3000T, 24 hours, 2pm), Taraz (400T, four hours, five times daily) and Kyzylorda (800T, seven hours, at 11am and 3pm). Marshrutkas depart when full to Turkistan (350T, two hours), Taraz (500T, three hours) and Kyzylorda (1000T, six hours). Shared taxis to Taraz (1200T, 2½ hours) go from the street outside the bus station to the west. More buses for Karaganda and Astana leave from outside the train station at 6pm.

For Chernyaevka on the Uzbekistan border, shared taxis and marshrutkas (500T, one to 1¼ hours) depart from the Kolos stop on Respubliki in southwestern Shymkent. Some may continue into Tashkent (around 1500T from Shymkent), where they will usually drop you at a metro station; otherwise it is a 10-minute taxi ride from the border to the nearest metro station (Buyuk Ipak Yuli), or 25 minutes (US\$5) to the city centre.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 95 21 20) is at the end of Kabanbay Batyr. At least four trains a day go to Taraz (700T, four to five hours) and Almaty (2500T to 3500T, 12 to 15 hours), and three or more to Turkistan (four hours) and Kyzylorda (nine hours). There are also trains to Aqtöbe (27 hours) daily, to Moscow (50 hours) most days, and to Mangyshlak (Aktau, 53 hours), Atyrau (37 hours) and Astana (24 hours) every two days. The best Almaty service is train 12, leaving at 5.40pm. The Hotel Ordabasy has a **train ticket window** (☎ 53 46 05; ☒ 8am-1pm & 2-8pm).

Getting Around

From the airport, marshrutka 12 runs to Tauke-Khan in the centre. To get to the airport, you can catch it heading west on Tauke-Khan between Dulati and Konaev. A taxi costs 500T to 1000T.

From the train station buses 5 and 21 and marshrutkas 5, 9, 12 and 21 run to Ordabasy ploshchad, then along Kazybek Bi and west along Tauke-Khan (No 5 continues round to Respubliki).

From the bus station, walk north along the street on the west side of the station (Ayteke-Bi) and pick up bus 2, 8, 17, 65 or

75, or marshrutka 2, 50 or 65 to Ordabasy ploshchad. Both 65s continue up Kazybek Bi and west on Tauke-Khan.

Getting to the train and bus stations you can take (among others) bus or marshrutka 9 east on Tauke-Khan or from Ordabasy ploshchad.

AROUND SHYMKENT Sayram

pop 40,000

About 10km east of Shymkent, the busy little town of Sayram was a Silk Road stop long before Shymkent existed: in fact it's one of the oldest settlements in Kazakhstan, dating back possibly 3000 years. Kozha Akhmed Yasau (see p 148) was born here and Sayram is a stop for many pilgrims en route to his mausoleum at Turkistan. Sayram's population today is almost entirely Uzbek.

Most of the main monuments can be seen in a walk of about 1½ hours starting from Sayram's central traffic lights (ask marshrutka conductors for the Tsentr stop). Walk up Amir Temur, away from two mosque domes, and take the first street (unpaved) on the right. About 100m along, in a small fenced field on your right, is the circular, brick-built **Kydyra Minaret**, about 15m high and probably dating from the 10th century. You can climb up inside to view the Aksu-Dzhabagly mountains away to the east. Return to the central crossroads and continue straight ahead, passing the bazaar on your left. Just after the bazaar, on the right, is the 13th-century **Karashash-Ana Mausoleum**, where Akhmed Yasau's mother lies buried beneath the central tombstone. Continue 200m, passing the modern **Friday Mosque** on your right, to the large **Mirali Bobo Mausoleum**, where a leading 10th-century Islamic scholar lies buried. Now turn back and take the street to the left, Botbay Ata, before the Friday Mosque. This street follows the line of the old city walls, curving round to the right after 150m. Botbay Ata ends at a larger street, Yusuf Sayrami, where you'll see Sayram's modern **city gates** on your right. Head left along Yusuf Sayrami and you'll reach a green-and-yellow sign marking the spot where (according to legend) Kozha Akhmed Yasau's mentor Aristan Bab handed him a sacred persimmon stone, which had been given to Aristan Bab by the Prophet Mohammed (never mind that Aristan Bab lived five centuries after Mohammed's death).

About 200m past this spot, turn left into a cemetery to the three-domed **Abd al Aziz-Baba Mausoleum**. Its occupant is believed to have been a leader of the Arabic forces that brought Islam to the Sayram area way back in AD 766. Pilgrims come here for help in averting misfortune and the 'evil eye'.

For Sayram's two other main monuments it's easiest to get a taxi from the central crossroads. It shouldn't cost more than 200T to see both sites and return. The **Maryam Ana Mausoleum** is about 1km up Amir Temur from the crossroads, while the small 14th-century **Ibragim Ata Mausoleum**, where Akhmed Yasau's father lies, is on the northern edge of town, with a modern mosque and medressa attached.

Several chaikhans around the central crossroads serve inexpensive shashlyk, tea, soups, bread and *plov*. Frequent marshrutkas to Sayram (50T, 30 minutes) leave from Shymkent bazaar – the corner of Tauke-Khan and Tashenov is one place to catch them.

Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve

This beautiful 1319-sq-km patch of valleys and mountains climbing to the Kyrgyz and Uzbek borders east of Shymkent is the longest established (1926) and one of the easiest visited of Kazakhstan's nature reserves. The reserve, at the west end of the Talassky Alatau range (the most northwesterly spur of the Tian Shan), stretches from the edge of the steppe at about 1200m up to 4239m at Pik Sayram. The main access point is the village of Zhabaghy, 70km east of Shymkent as the crow flies and the base of one of Kazakhstan's longest-running and best-organised ecotourism programmes.

Aksu-Dzhabagly is promoted as the home of the tulip, and in April and May its alpine meadows are dotted with the wild bright-red Greig's tulip. Wildlife you stand a chance of spotting includes bears, ibex, argali sheep, paradise flycatchers and golden eagles. The scenery, a mix of green valleys with rushing rivers, snow-capped peaks and high-level glaciers, is gorgeous. You can visit any time of year, but the best months to come are April to September.

From Zhabaghy village it's 6km southeast to the reserve entrance, then 6km (about 1½ hours' walk) to Kshi-Kaindy, a mountain refuge near a waterfall at 1700m, then a further 6km to Ulken-Kaindy, a second refuge. From Ulken-Kaindy it's 10km to a group of

some 2000 stones with petroglyphs up to 900 years old, below a glacier descending from the 3800m peak Kaskabulak. A good way to visit these sites is by horse, spending two nights at Ulken-Kaindy. More demanding treks will take you over 3500m passes with nights in caves. Another great spot is the 300m-deep Aksu Canyon at the reserve's western extremity, a 25km drive from Zhabaghy village. In September and early October the canyon is a busy raptor migration route.

The community ecotourism and homestay programme here is run by the NGO **Wild Nature** (Dikaya Priroda; ☎ /fax 325-385 56 86, 701-4387086; baskakova2008@mail.ru; Taldybulak 14, Zhabaghy). Director Svetlana Baskakova, a knowledgeable biologist and great guide, speaks excellent English. Wild Nature charges per day include: guide, 3750T; horse, 1500T; camping in the reserve including meals, 4200T to 5000T per person; vehicle to Aksu Gorge, 6000T return. Obligatory fees for entering the reserve are 1050T per person per day, plus 1300T per group per day for an accompanying ranger. Zhenia & Lyuda's (below) also offers well-run excursions in the reserve with English-speaking guides, and both outfits offer interesting trips outside the reserve, including to the Chokpak bird-ringing station, 20km north, and to the little-visited Karatau mountains further north.

Shymkent-based travel firm, Altex (p143) maintains a camp of surprisingly comfortable metal-box cabins in a pretty location in a canyon beside the Sayram River on the west side of the reserve. A three-day/two-night trip runs about US\$150 to US\$200, including food, guide and transfers from Shymkent. From the camp it's possible to take a long day hike to two small lakes at 2000m, or tackle the more demanding Pik Sayram, a two-day climb requiring equipment.

SLEEPING

Wild Nature (Dikaya Priroda; ☎ /fax 325-385 56 86, 701-4387086; baskakova2008@mail.ru; Taldybulak 14, Zhabaghy) Offers comfortable homestays with hot showers in Zhabaghy village for 3800T per person per night (full board with local meals). Contact Wild Nature in advance: either direct, or through the EIRC in Almaty (p117), which can also help with travel arrangements.

Zhenia & Lyuda's Boarding House (☎ 325-385 56 96, 701-7175851; www.innaksu.com; Abay 36, Zhabaghy; per person full board 5000T) This friendly English-

speaking biologist couple have transformed their home on Zhabaghy's main street into a cosy small hotel. All rooms have two single beds and private bathroom. They also offer a wide range of outings. They have been in the business since 1990 and know their job.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Marshrutkas to Zhabaghy village (250T, two hours) leave the corner of Malyly Kozha and Tashenov in Shymkent (see map p143) about 11am and 2pm. Alternatively, there are marshrutkas about every half-hour, 7.30am to 3pm, from the same stop to Turar-Ryskulov (also called Vanovka, 200T), where you can get a taxi (500T) for the final 25km to Zhabaghy. Taxis from around the same stop in Shymkent charge about 2000T to Zhabaghy.

The Shymkent-bound train No 11 departing Almaty-II station at 6.15pm daily arrives about 7am at Tulkibas (3000T), a 15-minute taxi ride (1200T) from Zhabaghy village, best booked in advance through your accommodation.

Sayram-Ugam National Park

This park abutting the Uzbek border immediately southwest of the Aksu-Dzhabagly Reserve offers similar attractions and biodiversity to Aksu-Dzhabagly. A recently established community ecotourism programme provides homestays in the villages of Kaskasu and Dikhankol and the town of Lenger, outside the park's northern boundary. This is a less visited and cheaper alternative to Aksu-Dzhabagly, and you can even combine the two areas via a 60km, two- or three-day foot or horse trek between Zhabaghy and Kaskasu villages.

Good outings into the hills by foot or horse are to Kaskasu Canyon and Ak-Mechet Gorge (day trips), and Susingen Lake (two or three days, camping). Community-ecotourism prices per day are 2000T per guide (English speakers available) or horse, 3000T for homestays or camping including meals. There's a 200T per person park entrance fee.

Homestays are slightly more basic than at Zhabaghy, with outside toilets (except at Lenger). At Kaskasu and Lenger you can stay in yurts (2900T).

Make arrangements through the Ecotourism Information Resource Centre (p117) in Almaty, or contact the local coordinator, **Abdeshev Alikhan** (☎ 300-222 03 28; a3@ok.kz), at Kaf

Kara-Kia in Lenger. He speaks little English, though.

Lenger is 40km southeast of Shymkent; Dikhankol is 75km and Kaskasu 100km. The ecotourism people offer taxis from Shymkent to Lenger (1200T, 30 minutes), Dikhankol (2300T, 1¼ hours) and Kaskasu (2800T, 1½ hours). From Shymkent bazaar there are frequent marshrutkas (100T, 40 minutes) and shared taxis (150T, 40 minutes) to Lenger, plus one afternoon bus to Dikhankol (200T, two hours) and Kaskasu (200T, 2½ hours).

Otrar

About 150km northwest of Shymkent lie the ruins of Otrar, the town that brought Jenghiz Khan to Central Asia. Much of the rest of Asia and Europe might have been spared the Mongols if Otrar's governor had not murdered the great khan's merchant-envoys here in 1218. A thriving Silk Road town where the scientist Al-Farabi (AD 870–950) was born, Otrar was mercilessly trashed by Jenghiz' forces after a six-month siege in reprisal for the envoy outrage. It was rebuilt afterwards but eventually abandoned around 1700 after being trashed again by the Zhungars (Oyrats). Today it's just a large dusty mound, known locally as Otyrar-Töbe, 11km north of the small town of Shauildir, but recent excavation and conservation work with Unesco help has revealed some interesting bits of what lies below the surface.

En route from Shymkent, stop at the **Otrar Museum** (☎ 325-442 17 22; Zhibek Zholy 1; admission 100T; ☎ 9am–6pm) in Shauildir. Worthwhile tours in English cost only 100T. At **Otyrar-Töbe** (admission 100T; ☎ 8am–dusk), you can inspect low walls and pillar-stumps of the 14th-century Palace of Berdibek (where Timur died in 1405), the palace mosque and a bathhouse – all post-Jenghiz – and a small residential area and a section of city wall from the 10th to 12th centuries.

Two kilometres from the ruins is the **Aristan-Bab Mausoleum**, the tomb of an early mentor of Kozha Akhmed Yasau. The existing handsome, domed, brick building here dates from 1907 and is a stop for pilgrims heading to Turkistan (p148).

Marshrutkas to Shauildir (500T, two hours) leave up to 15 times daily from the Samal bus stop in Shymkent's northwestern suburbs (reachable by city buses 9 and 58 from Ordabasy ploshchad). Alternatively, get a Turkistan-bound marshrutka from Shymkent's main

bus station to Törtkök (350T, 1¼ hours), then pick up a Shauldir-bound marshrutka (200T, 45 minutes), or taxi, there. From Turkistan, Shymkent-bound marshrutkas can drop you at Törtkök. A taxi from Shauldir to Otyrar-Töbe and Aristan-Bab shouldn't cost more than 1000T round-trip.

TURKISTAN ТҮРКЕСТАН

☎ 32533 / pop 100,000

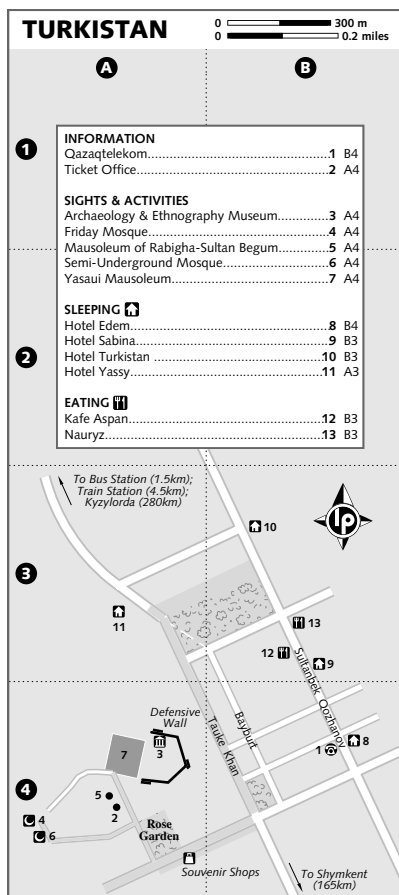
At Turkistan, 165km northwest of Shymkent in the Syr-Darya valley, stands Kazakhstan's greatest architectural monument and its most important site of pilgrimage. The mausoleum of the first great Turkic Muslim holy man, Kozha Akhmed Yasau, was built by Timur in the late 14th century on a grand scale comparable with his magnificent creations in Samarkand. Turkistan has no rivals in Kazakhstan for manmade beauty. It's an easy day trip from Shymkent, though staying overnight is enjoyable.

Turkistan was already an important trade and religious centre by the time the revered Sufi teacher and mystical poet Kozha Akhmed Yasau was born at Sayram, probably in 1103. Yasau underwent ascetic Sufi training in Bukhara, but lived much of the rest of his life in Turkistan, dying here, it's thought, about 1166. He had the gift of communicating his understanding to ordinary people through poems and sermons in a Turkic vernacular, a major reason for his enduring popularity. He founded the Yasauia Sufi order and is said to have retired to an underground cell at the age of 63 for the rest of his life, in mourning for the Prophet Mohammed who had died at the same age. Local lore today has it that three pilgrimages to Turkistan are equivalent to one to Mecca.

Yasau's original small tomb was already a place of pilgrimage before Timur ordered a far grander mausoleum built here in the 1390s. Timur died before it was completed and the main façade was left unfinished – it remains today bare of the beautiful tilework that adorns the rest of the building, with scaffolding poles still protruding from the brickwork. From the 16th to 18th centuries Turkistan was the capital of the Kazakh khans.

Orientation & Information

Coming by road from Shymkent, you'll enter Turkistan from the southeast along Tauke Khan and the mausoleum will loom into view on your left. Sultanbek Qozhanov, two blocks



east of Tauke Khan, is the main street, with several hotels and restaurants. The bus station is about 2km northwest of the centre, and the train station is 5km west.

You can phone from **Qazaqtelekom** (Sultanbek Qozhanov; ☎ 401 83/4; ☎ 8am-midnight).

Sights

Approaching the Yasau Mausoleum through a lovely **rose garden**, you'll see on the left, just past the ticket office, a good replica of the small 15th-century **Mausoleum of Rabigha-Sultan Begum** (the original was torn down for tsarist building material in 1898). Rabigha-Sultan Begum was Timur's great-granddaughter and wife of Abylqayyr Khan, a 15th-century leader of the then-nomadic Uzbeks. Abylqayyr put

the finishing touches to the structure of the Yasau mausoleum's façade (note the distinct brickwork at the top of the arch) but was killed in the 1468 feud which split the Uzbeks and effectively gave birth to the Kazakh people.

The **Yasau Mausoleum** (admission 200T; ☎ 9am-6pm) itself has a slightly museum-like feel despite being a place of pilgrimage. Visitors don't usually remove shoes though women normally wear headscarves. The main chamber is cupped with an 18m-wide dome, above a vast, 2000kg, metal **kazan** (cauldron) for holy water, given by Timur. Around this central hall are 34 smaller rooms on two floors: Yasau's tomb lies beyond an ornate wooden door at the end of the chamber: you can view it through a grille from a room on its right-hand side. Don't miss the mausoleum's mosque, with its beautifully tiled mihrab.

The glorious blue, turquoise and white tiling on the outside of the building merits close inspection. Note the particularly lovely fluted rear dome, above Akhmed Yasau's tomb chamber.

A number of other monuments, all included in the ticket, stand nearby. To the west, on a small hill, are the wood-pillared, 19th-century **Friday Mosque** (Zhuma Meshiti) and, next door, the 12th-to-15th-century **semi-underground mosque** with the cell Yasau to which is said to have withdrawn. Just east of the mausoleum, built into its defensive wall, the **Archaeology & Ethnography Museum** has material on old Turkistan and many other ancient settlements in the Syr-Darya valley.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Sabina (☎ 3 14 05; Sultanbek Qozhanov 16; s/d 900/1500T) Turkistan's budget option was being remodelled at research time, which will probably make it more expensive. But the rooms are still smallish, sharing bathrooms, so it should remain in the budget bracket.

Hotel Yassy (☎ 4 01 83/4; Tauke Khan 1; s 3000-3750T, d/tr 4500/6000T; ☎) The best place in town, with comfortable rooms sporting satellite TV and balconies, some with splendid views of the mausoleum. There's also an efficient restaurant here (dishes 200T to 400T). Breakfast is included in room rates. No intercity phone calls though.

Hotel Turkistan (☎ 4 21 97; fax 4 14 26; Sultanbek Qozhanov; r 4500) East of Hotel Yassy, this is just as good, with thick red carpets, but you gotta pay for breakfast.

Nauryz (☎ 3 22 78; Sultanbek Qozhanov; dishes 100-250T; ☎ 9am-3am) This colourful restaurant, built in a mock old-Turkistan style complete with duck pond, serves up excellent Turkish food (plus shashlyk, salads and pizzas) and is quite a late-night hang-out, with music echoing around the town.

Kafe Aspan (Sultanbek Qozhanov; dishes 130-300T; ☎ noon-midnight) Across the street, this is neater and quieter, with good salads, soups and meat dishes.

Getting There & Around

From the bus station, buses run to Shymkent (250T, three hours) about hourly from 9am to 6pm, while marshrutkas head to Kyzylorda (700T, four hours) when full. Marshrutkas for Shymkent (350T, two hours) go from a yard about 200m south of the bus station.

The train station has at least two daily trains west to Kyzylorda (five hours), Aral'sk (14 hours) and Aqtöbe (27 hours), and east to Shymkent (four hours), Taraz (eight hours) and Almaty (19 hours).

'Aytovokzal' buses and marshrutkas (all 20T) run between Sultanbek Qozhanov and the bus station.

SAURAN

Northwest of Turkistan stands probably the best preserved and most atmospheric of all the many ruined Silk Road cities in the Syr-Darya valley. Sauran was inhabited until the 18th century and its circuit of limestone walls, plus the remains of some bastions and gates, still stand despite conquerors and elements. It's visible about 1.5km west of the Turkistan-Kyzylorda highway, some 40km out of Turkistan – looming on a low hill like something out of *The Lord of the Rings* (but remember: it's Sauran, not Sauron). The site is normally unsupervised. A taxi from Turkistan should cost around 2500T to 3000T round-trip.

KYZYLORDA ҚЫЗЫЛОРДА

☎ 32422 / pop 200,000

On the Syr-Darya river, 280km northwest of Turkistan, Kyzylorda (meaning Red Capital) was the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan from 1925 to 1929 but was dropped in favour of cooler Almaty when the Turksib railway reached there. Evidence of this former glory can be seen in the ornate train station. Today nearby oil and gas operations are restoring

BAYKONUR COSMODROME

The Baykonur Cosmodrome, in amid semidesert about 250km northwest of Kyzylorda, has been the launch site for all Soviet- and Russian-crewed space flights since Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, was lobbed up in 1961. In fact the launch site wasn't really in Baykonur, which is actually a town 300km to the northeast, but the USSR told the International Aeronautical Federation that Gagarin's launch point was Baykonur, and that name has stuck. The Russian military town of Baykonur (formerly Leninsk), built to guard and service the cosmodrome, is on the Syr-Darya river south of the cosmodrome itself. The train station between town and cosmodrome is called Töretam. The launch site is about 30km north of here.

After the collapse of the USSR, the cosmodrome became a useful card in Kazakhstan's dealings with Russia, which inherited the Soviet space programme. In 1994 Kazakhstan agreed to lease Baykonur to Russia for 20 years for US\$115 million a year (the lease has since been extended to 2050). A few months later the Kazakh cosmonaut Taldat Musabaev and the Russian Yuri Malenchenko took off on a symbolic joint visit to the Mir space station. Launches are periodically halted when things go amiss. Visit the Karaganda Ecological Museum (p168) if you're interested in seeing some of the debris that has fallen to earth from Baykonur-launched rockets.

Today Kazakhstan is developing its own space programme. Its first communications satellite was launched from Baykonur in 2006. Kazakhstan and Russia are working together on a launch complex for the new Russian Angara rocket, which is more powerful and supposedly more eco-friendly (because of its kerosene-and-oxygen fuel) than existing systems.

This area is not open to casual travellers. Trying to talk or bribe your way in from Töretam won't get you anywhere near the cosmodrome and could get you into a lot of trouble. Some travel agencies in Kazakhstan, however, can arrange group visits on which you may or may not see a launch, depending on the schedule, weather etc. These include **Sayakhat** (☎/fax 324-227 21 85, 6 26 76; sayahat1973@mail.ru; Hotel Kyzylorda, Tokmaganbetova 22) in Kyzylorda, which quotes 15,000T per person (up to 10 people); the Karaganda Ecological Museum (p168); and Asia Discovery (p118).

some prosperity to the city, which is enjoying a colourful facelift. Mosquitoes are a pest here.

The **Historical Museum** (☎ 7 61 52; Auezova 20; admission 80T; ☎ 9am-5pm), spreading over 14 halls on archaeology, natural history and ethnography, has an English-language interpreter and is translating all explanatory material into English. The **Syr-Darya Promenade** is a popular evening hang-out (and make-out point) from late spring to early autumn. The **Old Bazaar** (Ayteke Bi; ☎ 9am-7pm) still has a hectic Central Asian atmosphere.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kyzylorda (☎ 7 11 21; fax 26 12 54; Tokmaganbetova 19; r from 6000T; ☎) This recently remodelled central hotel, located opposite the Historical Museum, also boasts a café and internet café.

Hotel Asetan (☎ 6 25 43; Ayteke Bi 28; r from 6000T) Not far from Hotel Kyzylorda, the Asetan, also recently remodelled, has large, comfortably furnished rooms.

Restoran Baron (☎ 7 62 60; Konaev; mains 350-500T; ☎ 10am-2am) This friendly place located near

the train station does some of the best shashlyk in town, including fish varieties.

Remet (☎ 6 21 41; Auezova 7; dishes 350-1500T; ☎ 10am-2am) Another friendly place with decent pizza; the nonsmoking upstairs section is the coolest place in town.

Getting There & Away

The airport, 17km south of the city, has flights to Almaty (14,000T to 17,000T) daily, and to Aktau (19,000T), Astana (17,000T), Atyrau (14,000T to 19,000T), Shymkent (11,000T), Taraz (11,000T), and Moscow (40,000T) up to four times weekly. Train services are the same as for Turkistan. A few buses and marshrutkas run daily to Turkistan (600T to 700T, four to five hours), Shymkent (800T to 1000T, six to seven hours) and Aral'sk (900T, seven hours).

ARALSK АРАЛЫБЕК

☎ 32433 / pop 36,000

Aral'sk, 475km northwest of Kyzylorda on the same road and railway, used to be an important fishing port on the shores of the Aral Sea. A large mosaic in its train station depicts

how in 1921 Aral'sk's comrades provided fish for people starving in Russia. Today a large part of the Aral Sea is gone, victim of Soviet irrigation schemes that took water from its lifelines, the Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya rivers, and pushed the shoreline 60km out from Aral'sk (see p77). If you want to witness the notorious Aral Sea environmental disaster first-hand, Aral'sk is easier to visit, and more interesting, than similarly defunct ports in Uzbekistan. Nor is everything quite so gloomy here: efforts to save part of the sea seem to be succeeding (see the boxed text, below) and a small-scale fishing industry has started up again.

Sights & Activities

A few rusting **boats** lie in the former harbour, just outside the hotel. In 2003, in honour of Aral'sk's 100th birthday, some were put on platforms and painted as a tribute to fallen heroes. In the centre of town, the local **history museum** (admission 150T; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) has some old photos of the fishermen in action, along with contemporary local paintings of the disaster itself.

Close to the harbour is the ruined fish processing plant, Aralrybprom, which finally

went bankrupt in the late 1990s, having stayed alive 20 years after the Aral departed by canning fish from the Baltic and Vladivostok. A new plant on the edge of the city, **Kambala Balyk** (Murzhaubaeva), now employs 60 people processing fish from the Aral's revived fishing industry, sending produce as far as Russia, Ukraine and northern Kazakhstan.

At **Zhalanash**, a former fishing village 63km west of Aral'sk, you can still see a **ship cemetery**, where several abandoned hulks rust in the open desert.

The NGO **Aral Tenizi** (☎ 2 22 56, 2 36 51, 701-2608923; www.aral'sk.net; Makhataeva 10) can arrange English-speaking guides and drivers to visit the sites. Ask for English-speaking Akmaral Utemisova. A day trip to the ship cemetery and the sea costs US\$92 per 4WD (up to four passengers); to the dike (220km one-way) it's US\$115. Trips on fishing boats are also possible. Aral Tenizi charges all clients a US\$20-per-group membership fee including a visit to the Kambala Balyk fish factory. Try to contact staff ahead, to allow time to make your arrangements.

Readers have recommended **Ismaliev Almatbek** (☎ 2 35 75) as a reliable driver with good local connections.

THE ARAL SEA: A (SMALL) ENVIRONMENTAL SUCCESS STORY

The piles of dried flounder are stacked ever higher the closer you get to Aral'sk, and the women who sell them ever pushier. Where do these fish come from? Some come from the surviving puddles around the Aral, but more and more are being hauled out of the Aral itself – that is, the Little Aral.

With the help of international aid agencies and lenders like the World Bank, Kazakhstan has revived the northeast corner of the Aral, now severed from its southern body.

A mud dike was built across the last channel connecting the northern and southern portions in the 1990s. With no outlet to the south, the Little Aral started to fill up again with water from the Syr-Darya. The sea crept back to within 27km of Aral'sk, only to recede again after the dike collapsed in 2002. Between the 1960s and 2003 the Aral Sea lost about three-quarters of its 68,000-sq-km area and some 80% of its water.

From 2003 to 2005, a new, US\$85-million, 13km-long, 10m-high concrete dike was built between the two parts of the sea. Within a few months of its completion, water levels in the Little Aral had already risen by several metres, faster than expected. Rehabilitation of waterworks along the Syr-Darya also helped, by increasing the flow of water into the sea. By mid-2006, water was within 23km of Aral'sk, and fishing boats were operating from the new Kök-Aral dike and even some outlying villages. Flounder is the main catch: introduced to the Aral from the Sea of Azov in 1979, this proved the only species able to survive the Aral's extreme salinity in the 1990s. Since then pike, pike-perch, bream and carp have found their way back into the Little Aral. Locals also say the noxious dust storms that plagued communities such as Aral'sk have stopped.

The dike probably condemns the larger southern lake to accelerated evaporation, but proponents argue that the southern Aral is a lost cause anyway, with no hope of an increase in water from the Amu-Darya, which flows through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Sleeping & Eating

Aral Tenizi (☎ 2 22 56, 2 36 51, 701-2608923; www.aralsk.net; Makhataeva 10; per person US\$15) The NGO Aral Tenizi offers accommodation with host families – with reliable running water, it says. Breakfast is included.

Aibek B&B (☎ 2 32 56; Makhataeva 19; d with shared bathroom 3500T) Near the old port, this basic homestay has clean rooms with home-cooked meals.

Yaksart Hotel (☎ 2 1479; Makhataeva 14; d 3500T, ste per person US\$38; 🏠) Aralsk's hotel is opposite Aibek B&B. It doesn't always have running water.

For meals, the two best central bets are **Rakhat** (Gorkogo; dishes 100-300T; 🍴 11am-midnight), a modern place serving Russian and Kazakh standards and a few European variations, and **Chin-Son** (Portovaya; dishes 100-300T; 🍴 11am-midnight), with spicy Korean dishes.

Getting There & Around

Aralsk's train station, called Aralskoe More, is a 10-minute walk northeast of the central square. The Almaty–Aqtöbe train 23 arrives at 10.30pm, and the Aqtöbe–Almaty train 24 arrives at 4.29am. In July and August, departure train tickets can be brutally hard to come by. Buy them for the next night's train when you arrive. Even better, buy onward or return tickets before arriving.

Buses depart to Kyzylorda (900T, seven hours) between 8pm and 11pm from the train station. It's advisable to go and reserve a place around 6pm. Aral Tenizi (p151) can arrange taxis to or from Kyzylorda (15,000T, four to five hours).

WESTERN KAZAKHSTAN

Most Westerners who come to Kazakhstan's far west – so far west that the part beyond the Ural River is in Europe – are involved in exploiting Kazakhstan's biggest oil and gas fields: Tenghiz (oil), Karachaganak (gas) and the offshore oil of Kashagan beneath the Caspian Sea. Oil has brought boom times to the region's four main cities, though elsewhere the human population is pretty sparse and the landscape is chiefly desert, apart from marshy areas around the northeast Caspian coastline.

For those with a taste for adventurous exploring, the deserts east of Aktau, dotted with

underground mosques, ancient necropolises, abandoned caravanserais and spectacular rock formations, are just the ticket.

Western Kazakhstan is a gateway to Central Asia from Azerbaijan or Russia, and there are even flights from Europe to Atyrau and Uralsk.

The region is one hour behind Astana, Almaty and the rest of the country.

AQTÖBE АҚТӨБЕ

☎ 3132 / pop 300,000

Aqtöbe (formerly Aktyubinsk), on the main railway to Moscow about 100km from the Russian border, is a developing commercial hub that has experienced an influx of multinational oil and gas companies and an accompanying facelift.

Near the lively market is the local **museum** (☎ 21 13 67; Altynsarin 14; admission 50T; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-6pm) where Rosa, an English-speaking curator, might be available to give you a tour.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Aktyubinsk (☎ 56 28 29; hotel@aktobe.kz; Abylkhair Khan 44; s/d 3600/4200T) Central hotel with clean Soviet-style rooms equipped with TV and fridge. From the station take bus 1 or 15, or a taxi (300T).

Hotel Albion (☎ 21 00 18; albion_hotel@rambler.ru; AYTEKE Bi 13; r US\$184-219; 🏠) The best in town, with spacious, modern rooms, within walking distance of the train station.

Kofeynya Espresso (☎ 57 27 55; Abylkhair Khan 85; 🕒 9am-9pm) A nice coffee shop where you can rent a laptop with wi-fi (300T per hour), on the 2nd-floor of a blue-domed business centre.

Stanbul Café (Abylkhair Khan 57A), near the main mosque which has the distinction of doubling as a shopping mall, is an economical Turkish haunt with decent kebabs, soups and salads.

Next door to Stanbul Café is **Chindale** (Abylkhair Khan), an upscale Japanese-Korean restaurant.

Getting There & Away

Flights go to Almaty (28,000T) and Astana (21,000T to 24,000T) daily, and Atyrau (14,300T) and Aktau (15,250T) most days. There are two weekly flights to Moscow.

Trains from the **station** (☎ 21 17 77) run to Uralsk (1500T, 10 to 12 hours) and Almaty (5500T, 40 to 46 hours) twice daily; to Aktau (3100T, 24 hours), Atyrau (2050T, 14 hours), Moscow (37 hours) and Tashkent (29 to 32 hours) at least once daily; and to Astana (27

hours) and Bishkek (38 hours) every two days. Russian officials have started checking for Russian transit visas on trains between Aqtöbe and Uralsk, which duck into Russia for about 100km en route.

URALSK УРАЛЫСК

☎ 3112 / pop 250,000

Closer to Vienna than Almaty and straddling the dividing line between Asia and Europe, Uralsk (Kazakh: Oral) is the first or last city for some Central Asian overlanders. It's also a base for many expat oilmen hauling themselves out to the pumping stations at Karachaganak, 150km east of the city.

Uralsk, founded by Cossacks in the 17th century, has its roots in Russia, as is clear from the beautiful, brightly painted, traditional Russian architecture throughout the centre. Lenin saw to it that Uralsk was included in the Kazakh SSR in order to make Russian migrants feel happier.

Teatralnaya, the main pedestrian street, is Uralsk's mini version of Moscow's Arbat. Kazakhstan's first **drama theatre**, a handsome brick affair, has stood here for 150 years. The main boulevard, Dostyk, has some of the finest architecture in town, including two Russian Orthodox churches, brilliantly lit at night.

A famous Russian serf rebellion was launched in 1773 at what's now the **Pugachev Museum** (☎ 50 65 86; Dostyk 35; 🕒 closed Mon & Tue). Yemelyan Pugachev led a group of Cossacks and hundreds of thousands of serfs in a rebellion against the autocratic Catherine the Great that spread to the Ural Mountains and along the Volga. The museum is in Pugachev's original log house in Uralsk's oldest district, Kuriny, with plenty of replica and original furniture and artefacts – best reached by taxi.

Sleeping & Eating

The **Hotel Oral** (☎ 50 60 17; Kurmangazy 80; r 2000-6000T) and **Saykhat Hotel** (☎ 51 30 03; Temir Masina 38; r 4000-11,000; 🏠) are remodelled Soviet hotels offering a clean place to sleep. There are two Western-style hotels where at least some English is spoken: **Hotel Chagala** (☎ 50 60 17; www.chagalagroup.com; Temir Masina; r 11,000-24,000T) and the excellent **Pushkin Hotel** (☎ 51 35 60; www.pushkinhotel.com; Dostyk 148B; s/d US\$130/208) with friendly staff, great new furniture and a Venetian feel.

Dozens of restaurants line Dostyk from the train station to the Ural River. **Camelot** (☎ 50 39 01; Dostyk 185; mains 700-2500T), right in the centre, is the classiest place in town, great for varieties of the local red fish and the imaginative names of its dishes (English menu available). The Western-style **Dixie Pub** (Atrium Mall, Teatralnaya 17; mains 700-1800T) serves everything from fried calamari to a good burrito, in absolutely American-sized portions.

Getting There & Away

Uralsk has direct flights to Astana (22,000T), Atyrau, and Aktau five or six times weekly; to Almaty (24,500T) three times; to Moscow twice; and to London (by Astraeus, www.flyastraeus.com) and Baku once.

There are daily trains to Moscow (29 hours) and Almaty (54 hours). Trains to Almaty go via Aqtöbe, passing through part of Russia en route – check visa requirements.

Minibuses to Atyrau (2200T, six hours) leave Uralsk's train station at 6am, 7am and 9am. Shared taxis to Atyrau (4000T to 5000T, five hours) also go from the station.

ATYRAU АТЫРАУ

☎ 3122 / pop 147,000

Atyrau, 30km up the Ural River from its mouth on the Caspian Sea, began as a Russian fort in the 16th century and today acts as command station for the huge Tenghiz oilfield 200km south. Tengizchevroil, the multibillion-dollar joint venture exploiting the field, has its headquarters in this predominantly Kazakh town.

With direct flights from Amsterdam and Istanbul, Atyrau is a possible entry point into Kazakhstan, but unless you're here to work there's not very much reason to linger.

Orientation

The Ural River meanders through the town, flowing roughly north-south beneath the central bridge on Abay and marking the border between Asia and Europe. West of the bridge, on the European side, Abay becomes Satpaev. The train station is on the northeastern edge of town, 5km from the centre. The airport is 8km west of the centre.

Information

CATC (☎ 35 40 75/6/7; cat-atyrau@alarnet.com; Azattyq 25; 🕒 9am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat)

Ticketing and travel agency; offers discounts on rooms at some hotels.

Halyk Bank (☎ 25 15 37; Satpaev 4; ☎ 8.30am-12.45pm & 2.15-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) Currency exchange.

Qazaqtelekom (Abay btwn Azattyq & Makhambet; ☎ 8am-11pm) Phone from here.

Dangers & Annoyances

There have been occasional attacks and muggings on foreigners in Atyrau, chiefly in and around nightclubs and bars. Avoid confrontations and travel by official taxi after dark.

Mud coats the streets after wet spells from autumn to spring. If you visit during this time, bring appropriate footwear.

Sights & Activities

The modernised **Atyrau History Museum** (☎ 22 29 12; Azattyq 9B; admission 200T; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) has some interesting displays including a replica of the local 'Golden Man' – a 2nd-century-BC Sarmatian chief with gold-plated tunic, found in 1999 – and a room on recently excavated Saraychik, an old trading centre 55km north of Atyrau, where several khans of the Golden Horde were buried.

Opposite the History Museum is the **Art Museum** (☎ 25 48 03; Azattyq 11; admission 200T; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Tue-Sun), worth a look for its collection of paintings on Atyrau life.

On Satpaev 800m west of the bridge is a newish **public square** fitted with fountains, a monument to 19th-century Kazakh freedom fighters Makhambet and Isatai, and an annoying jumbo TV. The modern, blue-domed **Mangali Mosque** (Satpaev) is nearby. In the crumbling **Russian Orthodox church** (Taimanov), dating from 1888, emerges like a jewelled finger from the surrounding shacks.

Sleeping

There's no shortage of good hotels – at a price.

Hotel Kair (☎ 25 07 65; Atambaev 19A; s/d from 4600/6200T) A relatively inexpensive, well-kept place south of the river; no food or bar though.

Hotel Ak Zhaik (☎ 32 78 81/2; fax 32 20 11; www.akzhaikhotel.com; Azattyq; s/d 10,000/18,000T; ☎) Recently renovated, this very central hotel has comfy rooms and a slew of useful facilities including ATM, train ticket office, pub with wi-fi internet and a good lobby café. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Dana (☎ 21 08 75/63; danahotel@mail.ru; Tolebaev 40; s/d from 12,800/18,000T; ☎) About 1.5km west of the bridge, the Dana is a medium-sized hotel in vaguely alpine style with excellent, large, carpeted rooms and good service. Breakfast included in rates.

River Palace Hotel (☎ 25 52 36, 35 52 41; www.hotelriverpalace.com; AYTEKE BI 55; d/stc US\$162/324; ☎) The luxurious, Italian-owned River Palace shares a modernistic riverfront building with apartments and offices. The rooftop pool (2000T for nonguests in summer) is a welcome and popular feature.

Renaissance Atyrau Hotel (☎ 90 96 00; www.renaissancehotels.com/guwb; Satpaev 15B; r from 28,000T; ☎) Elegant new international-class luxury Marriott hotel with all the facilities.

Eating & Drinking

McMagic's (☎ 25 54 45; Makhambet 116A; dishes 200-700T; ☎ 10am-midnight) In the big Daria store building, this is a reasonable Western-style burger and pizza bar.

Guns & Roses (☎ 32 78 78; Hotel Ak Zhaik, Azattyq; dishes 600-2500T; ☎ 8am-1am) Cosy English pub serving meals from English breakfast and salads to steaks and pasta. Also offers free wi-fi, live rock from 8pm Thursday to Saturday, and three big screens for sport.

Petrovski Restoran (☎ 32 10 99; Azattyq 2; mains 800-2500T; ☎ 8am-1am) Good European dishes and breakfasts are served at this stylish, pop-art-decked little place.

Fiesta (☎ 97 03 76; Satpaev 5B; mains 800-2500T; ☎ noon-midnight) Excellent oriental and Tex-Mex restaurant with relaxed ambience, in a residential area off the main road.

Stamford Pub (☎ 25 29 32; Azattyq 78A; beer 300-600T; ☎ 5pm-2am Sun-Thu, 5pm-5am Fri & Sat) Lively pub with a good rock/jazz band playing Thursday to Sunday nights. Packed with an international after-work crowd on Friday night.

Getting There & Away

From the **airport** (☎ 20 92 51/2) there are daily flights to Aktau (12,000T), Astana (from 23,500T) and Almaty (26,500T to 32,000T); to Aqtöbe (14,300T) and Uralsk (13,000T) most days; and to Kyzylorda (19,000T), Taraz (21,000T), Baku (23,000T), Moscow, Amsterdam and Istanbul a few times weekly.

From the **train station** (☎ 36 06 95; Volkznayaya 1) trains go daily to Mangyshlak (Aktau; 2700T, 21 hours), Aqtöbe (2050T, 15 hours) and Astrakhan (3700T, 14 hours); and to Almaty (6000T, 52 hours) and Astana (5000T, 46 hours) every two days. There's a ticket office in the Hotel Ak Zhaik.

A bus to Uralsk (3000T, seven hours) leaves the train station at 3am or 4am. Later, there are

minibuses and shared taxis (5000T per person, five hours), also from the train station.

Getting Around

Taxis to or from the airport should cost 500T but you may have to pay more coming into town. Buses and marshrutkas 3, 10, 14, 15 and 21 run between the train station and the centre and along Satpaev.

AKTAU AKTAY

☎ 3292 / pop 166,000

Stuck between the desert and the Caspian, hundreds of kilometres from anywhere else of any size, with all its water derived from desalination, Aktau is perhaps the most oddly situated of all the weirdly located places scattered across the former USSR.

Local uranium and oil finds were the reason Soviet architects began to lay out a model town of wide, straight streets here in 1958. Thanks to the sandy beaches on the blue Caspian and temperate climate (several degrees above zero in January), the place was also developed as an elite Soviet holiday resort.

Now uranium and tourism are in decline, but the oil industry is picking up the slack. With its broad streets, benign climate, seaside location and reasonable standard of living, Aktau is a pleasant town to spend a day or two. More of a reason to come here, though, are the natural and manmade wonders of the surrounding region, Mangistau – see p157.

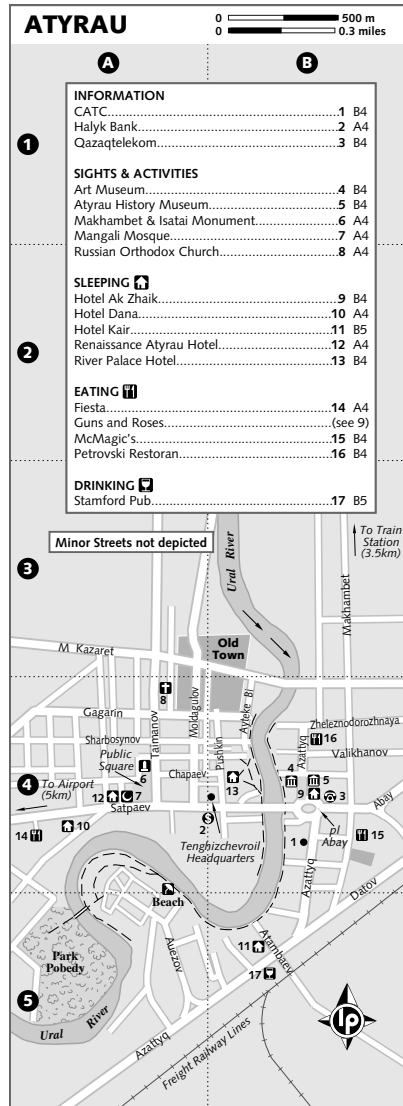
Orientation

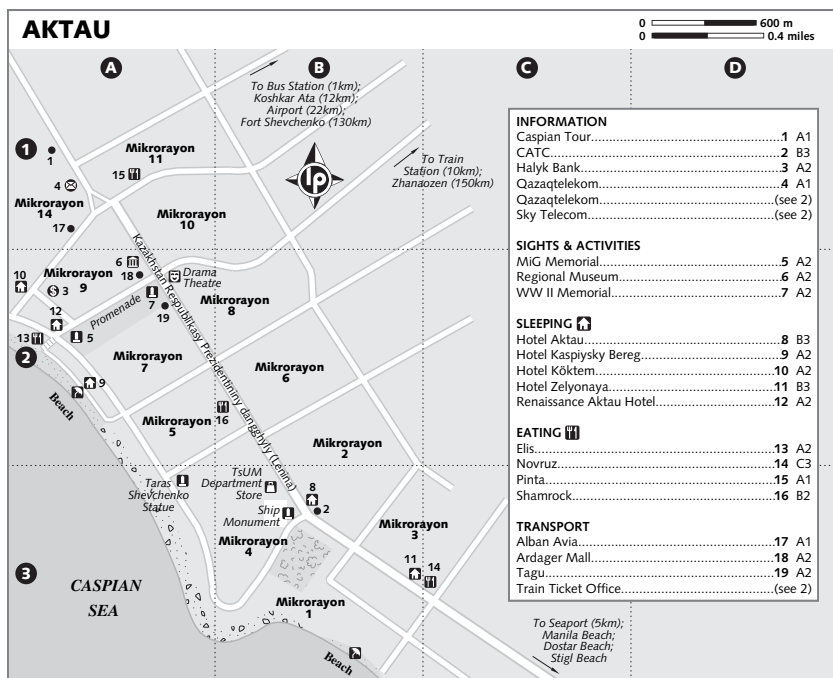
The only significant street with a name is Kazakhstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniy dangghyly (not surprisingly, many people still call it Lenina), a broad avenue sloping down from northwest to southeast, parallel to the coast. Aktau addresses are based on *mikrorayon* (microdistrict) and *dom* (building) numbers: 4-17-29 means Mikrorayon 4, Dom 17, Apartment 29.

Information

Caspian Tour (☎ 42 66 54; menzhan@rambler.ru; Dvoret Brakoschetania, Mikrorayon 14) Travel agency offering tours in and outside the city; the office is inside Aktau's wedding-ceremony palace.

CATC (☎ 50 75 04; cat-akta@alarnet.com; West Wing, Hotel Aktau, Mikrorayon 2; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) English-speaking travel agency offering flight and hotel bookings, visa support and cars with drivers.





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Halyk Bank (Mikrorayon 9, Dom 6; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri) Currency-exchange office.

Qazaqtelemek Hotel Aktau (West Wing, Hotel Aktau, Mikrorayon 2; ☎ 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun); Main Office (Kazakhstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniy dangghyly, Mikrorayon 14; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) You can phone from these offices.

Sky Telecom (West Wing, Hotel Aktau, Mikrorayon 2; internet per hr 300T; ☎ 9am-6pm) Public internet on two computers.

Turist (☎ 43 00 00; pbalatov@nursat.kz; Mikrorayon 9, Dom 4, Office 110; ☎ 10am-7pm) Experienced travel agency offering tours in and outside the city.

Dangers & Annoyances

As in Atyrau, foreigners have been the target of some attacks and muggings in Aktau, chiefly in and around bars and nightspots. Avoid confrontations and travel by official taxi after dark.

Sights

To best savour Aktau's atmosphere, stroll along the pedestrian walk from the large **WWII Memorial** beside Kazakhstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniy dangghyly to the **MiG fighter**

plane memorial at the seaward end of the street. From the MiG you can descend flights of steps to the breezy **seafrom**, a mixture of low cliffs, rocks and thin sandy strips. There are better, sandier beaches, costing 100T to 200T to access, south of town: **Manila**, about a 15-minute taxi ride (200T); the longer, less crowded **Dostar** (300T by taxi, 20 minutes); and **Stigl** (400T to 500T by taxi, 30 minutes).

Interesting displays about the Caspian and the Mangistau archaeological heritage make the **Regional Museum** (Mikrorayon 9, Dom 23A; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) worth a visit.

Sleeping

Hotel Aktau (☎ 50 47 07, 50 47 50; laura1@pochta.ru; Kazakhstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniy dangghyly, Mikrorayon 2, Dom 66; r 4680-12,450T; ☎) Despite renovations a few years ago, the Aktau already feels haggard again. Still, it's one of the less expensive places and rooms do have multichannel satellite TV. Some have sea views too. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Kaspysky Bereg (Caspian Shore Hotel; ☎ 50 16 41; fax 50 62 09; Mikrorayon 7; r 5000-13,000T) This homy small hotel near the seashore has good-sized

rooms sporting glassed-in showers and attractive Chinese silk 'paintings'. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Köktem (☎ 43 44 79; koktem_aktau@mail.online.kz; Mikrorayon 14, Dom 10; r 9800-14,000T; ☎) Well-run, welcoming hotel with sizeable, well-equipped, comfy rooms and English-speaking receptionists. Rates include breakfast.

Hotel Zelyonaya (Green Hotel; ☎ 50 73 04; Mikrorayon 3, Dom 100; r US\$110-165) This impeccably managed hotel is about 1km east of the Hotel Aktau. It only has suites and apartments, all large and well-furnished; and breakfast is included.

Renaissance Aktau Hotel (☎ 30 06 00; fax 30 06 01; www.renaissancehotels.com/scobr; Mikrorayon 9; s/d from US\$270/282; ☎) Aktau's Marriott hotel provides superstylish modern rooms and suites boasting wi-fi internet, satellite TV and in most cases sea views. The hotel has a heated pool and two elegant eateries. Breakfast is included.

Eating & Drinking

Novruz (☎ 51 66 66; Mikrorayon 3; mains 600-900T; admission after 8pm 400T; ☎ noon-2am) Enclosed in a courtyard and enlivened with plants and a fountain, this pleasant restaurant near Hotel Zelyonaya serves up European, Middle Eastern, Russian and Kazakh dishes. The Salman beer (brewed next door) is a nice local touch.

Pinta (☎ 31 17 40; Mikrorayon 11, Dom 8A; mains 800-1800T; ☎ noon-3pm & 6pm-1am) A cosy, relaxed, small restaurant with excellent service and a Russian-international menu specialising in pork, chicken and fish. A great coffee-and-cakes café (open 10am to 11pm) adjoins the restaurant.

Elis (☎ 43 85 02; Mikrorayon 7; dishes 800-1800T; ☎ noon-2am) The publike upper bar at this multipurpose leisure centre on the coastal embankment serves a range of good international food, and a solid rock and pop band plays from 9pm except Wednesday.

Shamrock (☎ 52 18 38; Mikrorayon 5, Dom 5; dishes 900-2000T, draught beer 0.5L from 600T; ☎ noon-2am) An authentic and popular Irish pub, Shamrock serves large helpings of Italian, Mexican, English, Russian and even Irish food. A good rock and jazz band plays Wednesday, Friday and Saturday from 10pm.

Getting There & Around

Aktau's **airport** (☎ 46 85 73) is 23km north of the centre (around 1000T by taxi). There

are flights six or seven days a week to Almaty (from 23,250T), Astana (18,000T to 25,000T), Aqtöbe (15,250T), Atyrau (12,000T to 14,500T) and Uralsk (17,250T). SCAT also flies to Kyzylorda (19,250T), Shymkent (21,250T), Astrakhan (Russia; 16,000T), Baku (Azerbaijan; 13,550T), Yerevan (Armenia; 21,550T) and Tbilisi (Georgia; 24,350T). There are five flights a week to Baku by Azerbaijan Airlines (14,000T to 27,000T) and three flights a week to Moscow by Transaero (32,000T to 62,000T). You'll find air ticket offices at the **airport** (☎ 46 82 25; ☎ 24hr) and **Ardager shopping mall** (☎ 42 71 71; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-9pm). **Alban Avia** (☎ 42 74 00; Mikrorayon 14, Dom 59) specialises in Baku flights and onward connections.

Aktau's **train station** (☎ 46 52 50), called Mangyshlak, is 12km east of the centre. Trains leave daily for Atyrau (2700T, 20 hours), Aqtöbe (3100T, 26 hours), Astana (5500T, 50 hours) and on odd dates for Almaty (7000T, 67 hours) via Aralsk and Shymkent. There's a **train ticket office** (Mikrorayon 2; ☎ 8am-1pm & 2-6.30pm) outside the Hotel Aktau. A taxi from station to city centre costs around 600T.

The **bus station** (Mikrorayon 28), in the north of town, has no bus services but marshrutkas leave when full to Zhanaozen and Shetpe (both 300T, two hours). There are also taxis to Zhanaozen and Fort Shevchenko (both 500/2000T for one place/whole cab, two hours).

A sea ferry to Baku, Azerbaijan leaves about every seven to 10 days from the seaport in the southeast of town. Cabin fares for the scheduled 18-hour crossing run from 7800T to 10,000T. Information and tickets are available from **Tagu** (☎ 51 39 89; cs-kz.narod.ru; Mikrorayon 7, Dom 12; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun). Take some food.

Bus and marshrutka 3 run from Hotel Aktau up Kazakhstan Respublikasy Prezidentiniy dangghyly as far as the main Qazaqtelemek office, then east to the bus station, and vice-versa.

AROUND AKTAU

The stony deserts of the Mangistau region, of which Aktau is capital, stretch 400km east to the border of Uzbekistan. Dotted with dramatic canyons and rock outcrops, surprising lakes, strange underground mosques, ancient necropolises and abandoned caravanserais, this fascinating region has barely begun to be explored even by archaeologists. A branch of the Silk Road once ran across these wastes, and sacred

sites, some with strong Sufic associations, are located where people buried their dead or where holy men dwelt. The underground mosques may have originated as cave-hermitages for ascetics who retreated to the deserts.

A few sites, including Beket-Ata and Fort Shevchenko, can be reached by public transport of sorts, but for most places you need a knowledgeable driver with a 4WD vehicle. Getting to these places along rough tracks across the surreal desert, with only the occasional herd of camels or sheep for company, is part of the fun. Stantours in Almaty (p117) and local firms Caspian Tour and Turist (p155) are all experienced operators offering trips here. Day trips from Aktau in a 4WD for up to four passengers generally cost US\$200 to US\$250; itineraries of several days for small or large groups are also available.

Koshkar Ata

All Kazakhstan is dotted with picturesque cemeteries or necropolises set outside villages and towns and Mangistau has a notable concentration of them: locals boast the figure 362, many of them very ancient. One of the most interesting is **Koshkar Ata**, at Akshukur, 12km north of Aktau on the Fort Shevchenko road. Its skyline of miniature domes and tow-

ers resembles some Arabian fairytale-fantasy, and just inside the entrance is an old tomb adorned with an unusually realistic ram carving, in contrast to the highly stylised rams known as *koita* found elsewhere.

Fort Shevchenko & Around

The dusty little town of Fort Shevchenko stands 130km north of Aktau near the tip of the Mangyshlak Peninsula. The **Local Museum** (admission 100T; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm), in a yurt-shaped building near the taxi stand, includes material on the region's necropolises and underground mosques, but the best reason to come here is the **Shevchenko Museum** (admission 100T; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm), behind the Local Museum. The great Ukrainian poet and artist Taras Shevchenko (1814-61) spent seven years in exile here in the 1850s, and the museum, housed in the former Russian military commandant's house (dating from 1850), exhibits many of his penetrating landscapes, local scenes, portraits and self-portraits. Beside the house is the cellarlike **zemlyanka** (admission 100T; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm), where the sympathetic commandant permitted Shevchenko to live and work. **Kafe Aybi** (Abdikhalikov; dishes around 250T; ☎ 10am-12.30am), by Fort Shevchenko's taxi stand, serves salads, *manty* and other local standards.

THE PILGRIMAGE TO BEKET-ATA

Beket-Ata, 285km southeast of Aktau, is an underground mosque to which the revered clairvoyant, healer and teacher Beket-Ata (1750-1813) retreated in the later part of his life, ultimately dying and being buried here. A Mangistau native, Beket-Ata studied in Bukhara and on his return he is believed to have set up four or five mosques, including this one where he founded a Sufi school. Every day dozens of pilgrims – and on holidays, hundreds – make the bumpy journey across the deserts to pray and receive Beket-Ata's inspiration. The underground mosque (three caves) is set in a rocky outcrop, overlooking a desert canyon. You won't quickly forget the journey here across otherworldly desertescapes and the pilgrimage atmosphere that touches all visitors.

Aktau tour firms run two-day trips to Beket-Ata costing US\$400 to US\$500 for up to four people. To do it independently, start by taking a marshrutka from Aktau bus station to the oil town of Zhanaozen (300T, two hours), 150km by paved road. From Zhanaozen bus station get a taxi to the bazaar (100T), where four-passenger 4WD vehicles leave every morning for Beket-Ata, charging 2000T per person or 6000T for the vehicle, round-trip. You'll spend most of the 135km to Beket-Ata lurching and bumping along steppe and desert tracks. En route, vehicles stop at Shopan-Ata, 55km from Zhanaozen, an ancient underground mosque and large necropolis dating back to at least the 10th century, where Shopan-Ata, a mentor of Beket-Ata, dwelt. The Zhanaozen-Beket-Ata trip takes five to six hours, and most groups sleep (free) in the pilgrim-hostel-cum-mosque-cum-dining-hall at Beket-Ata, before leaving early the next morning.

On arrival at Shopan-Ata and Beket-Ata all visitors are expected to purify themselves by using the squat toilets. If you're travelling with pilgrims, be ready to join in prayers and ritual walks round sacred trees too. You may be invited to join meals of the Kazakh national dish *bashbarmak* at both places, sitting round big bowls of food, eating with the right hand only.

About 5km beyond Fort Shevchenko, the coastal village of **Bautino**, with some pretty 19th-century Russian-style cottages, is developing as a service base for offshore oil and gas operations.

Shared taxis to Fort Shevchenko (500T, two hours) leave when full from Aktau's bus station. The last ones head back to Aktau around 5pm.

Other Destinations

Shakpak-Ata, though now deserted, is perhaps the most intriguing of all the area's underground mosques – a unique cross-shaped affair with three entrances, four chambers and a central hall supported by sculpted columns, cut behind a cliff some 125km north of Aktau, within view of the Caspian coast. Shakpak-Ata probably dates back to the 10th century, and its walls are adorned with Arabic inscriptions and drawings of plants and hands. The cliff is peppered with burial niches, and there's a necropolis of similar age below it, with more than 2000 tombs. The easiest approach is via Tauchik, with the last 25km on unpaved steppe roads.

Near the coast some 30km west of Shakpak-Ata (or 90km east from Fort Shevchenko), is **Sultan-Epe**. This is another underground mosque and necropolis pairing, on the edge of a deep, thickly vegetated canyon. Holy man Sultan-Epe, buried here, is considered the protector of sailors.

Around 90km southeast from Shakpak-Ata, in the vicinity of Shetpe, is **Sherkala** (Lion Rock), a 332m-high chalk outcrop rising mysteriously from the steppe. At its foot are the remains of a medieval caravanserai-fort. Between Shakpak-Ata and Sherkala is Torysh or the **Valley of Balls**, scattered with hundreds of giant stone balls, some over 2m wide. Within 20km of Sherkala is **Kyzylkala**, a ruined Silk Road town.

Each of these sites can be reached in day trips from Aktau and in some cases you can combine more than one in the same day.

NORTHERN KAZAKHSTAN

This is the most Russified part of Kazakhstan but it's also the location of the new capital Astana, chief crucible of the prosperous, multiethnic Kazakhstan of the future, an extravagant exercise in capital-city creation and the

pole around which the north of the country is being revived.

Though known for their bitter winters and Soviet-created industrial cities, the northern steppes also harbour surprising areas of natural beauty: the flamingo-filled lakes of Koralzhyn; the rocky hills, forests and lakes near Burabay; and the verdant countryside and tranquil villages southwest of Kokshetau.

Until the 19th century, this region was largely untouched except by Kazakh nomads and their herds. As Russia's hand stretched southwards, Russian and Ukrainian settlers came in growing numbers to farm the steppe – a million or more by 1900. Kazakh resistance was largely futile. In Soviet times, the Kazakhs were forced into collective farms and industrial cities such as Karaganda and Kostanay, which sprouted to exploit coal, iron ore and other minerals. Then in the 1950s huge areas of steppe were turned over to wheat in Khrushchev's Virgin Lands scheme (p111). A new influx of settlers, deportees and prisoners arrived from other parts of the USSR to work all the new projects.

In the 1950s most of the labour camps were closed, but a lot of the survivors stayed. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union many ethnic Germans, Russian and Ukrainians have left, but Kazakhs still number less than one-third in several areas.

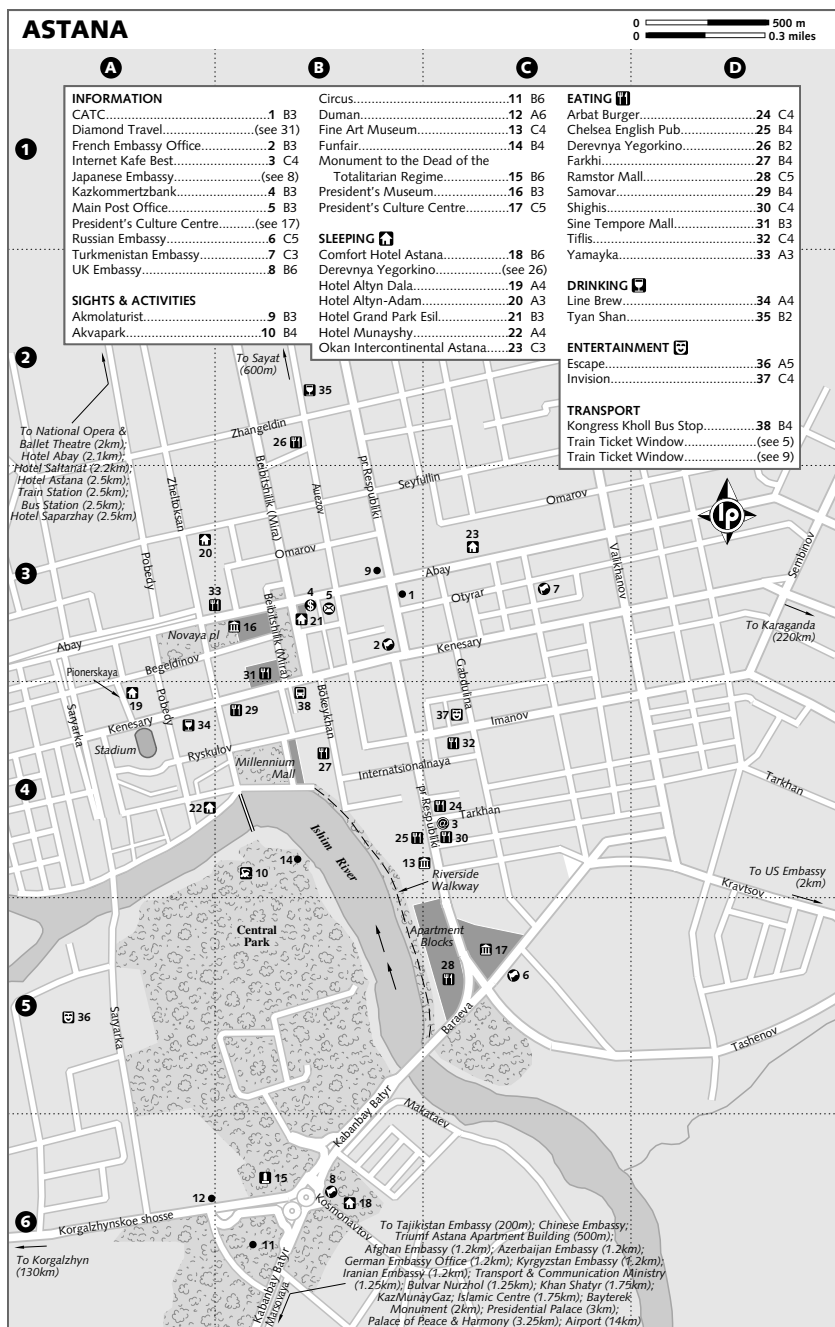
Astana apart, northern Kazakhstan sees more Westerners here to adopt children than Western tourists. Weatherwise, the best months to come are May, June, August and September. Winters are severe, with howling blizzards and temperatures down to -30°C in January.

ASTANA ACTAHA

☎ 3172 / pop 550,000

Love it or hate it, Astana is here to stay as Kazakhstan's capital. Just a medium-sized provincial city known for its bitter winters when President Nazarbaev named it out of the blue in 1994 as the country's future capital, Astana replaced Almaty in 1997. Since then its skyline has grown more fantastical by the year as a reported 8% of the national budget is lavished on transforming vast acreage south of the Ishim River into a new governmental-administrative zone, with daring buildings combining Islamic, Soviet, Western and wacky futuristic influences.

Ministries and functionaries were obliged to make an early move to Astana and are now in the process of shifting again to their permanent quarters from temporary ones in the old



centre north of the river. Foreign embassies are still trickling in. The old centre, which retains a feel of the provincial city that it was, is due to live on as Astana's commercial and cultural centre when the new government complex is fully operational: the target date is 2030, by which time Astana will boast a population of over a million.

Astana has undergone several identity changes since it was founded in 1830 as a Russian fortress called Akmolá (a Kazakh name meaning either 'white tomb' or 'white plenty'). When Nikita Khrushchev announced his Virgin Lands scheme, Akmolá became the project's headquarters and was renamed Tselinograd (Virgin Lands City) in 1961. After the USSR collapsed, Akmolá got back its old name, and would have kept it if Nazarbaev's plan to shift the capital here hadn't attracted such unfavourable comments. Cynics jibed that Akmolá would be the president's own political 'white tomb'. Thus the place became simply Astana – Kazakh for 'capital'. Reasons cited by Nazarbaev for the change were Astana's more central and less earthquake-prone location than Almaty, and better transport links with Russia.

Some people find Astana impersonal, and compare the poverty in which some Kazakhs still live with the billions spent on fantasy architecture. But many Kazakhstanis are clearly proud of their new capital, and as an exercise in nation building its merits are obvious. It's a fascinating process to witness.

Orientation

The old part of the city, north of the Ishim River (Yesil in Kazakh), is centred on the square at the south end of Beibitshilik (Mira). Most of the city's hotels, restaurants, shops and life are still north of the river, with Respubliki, running south to the main bridge over the Ishim, the liveliest zone. The new governmental hub of Kazakhstan is growing up south of the river (known portentously as the Levy Bereg or Left Bank).

The train and bus stations are side-by-side 3km north of the centre; the airport is 17km to the south.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Kafe Best (☎ 21 11 67; Respubliki 8; internet per hr 300T; ☎ 9am–2am) Lives up to its name with plenty of normally speedy computers, webcams and CD burning (200T).

President's Culture Centre (☎ 22 33 38; Respubliki 2; internet per hr 200T; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat) There's internet in the library here; bring your passport.

MONEY

ATMs are available at banks, shopping malls and elsewhere. Foreign-exchange booths are dotted around the city, including at **Kazkommertzbank** (☎ 32 35 18; Abay 66; ☎ 9.30am–5pm Mon–Fri), which changes travellers cheques. There's a Western Union window in the main post office.

POST

Main post office (Auezov 71; ☎ 8am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–6pm Sat, 10am–3pm Sun)

TELEPHONE

Look for 'Peregovorny Punkt' signs to locate public phone offices. **Internet Kafe Best** (left) offers international calls for 30T to 50T per minute.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

CATC (☎ 32 78 44; cat-astana@alarnet.com; Respubliki 30; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat) Air and train tickets, hotel bookings.

Diamond Travel (☎ 15 38 77; Sine Tempore Mall, Beibitshilik 9; ☎ 10am–9pm) Airline-booking and travel agent.

Sights & Activities

NORTH OF THE RIVER

The gleaming, blue-domed **President's Culture Centre** (☎ 22 33 00; Baraeva 1; admission 90T; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) houses the high-quality main museum. The ground floor holds traditional Kazakh items – a brightly decked yurt, carpets, costumes, elaborate horse tackle. Upstairs you'll find the archaeological section, including models of some of the country's most important old buildings, and the Hall of Gold and Precious Stones, with the obligatory Golden Man replica. The 3rd-floor covers Kazakhstan's history from the 14th century on. Explanatory material is in English, Kazakh and Russian. Photos are not allowed.

The **Fine Art Museum** (☎ 21 54 30; Respubliki 3; admission 100T; ☎ 10am–6pm Tue–Sun) is a little further up Respubliki. The small permanent collection includes some striking works and there are regularly changing temporary exhibitions.

The **President's Museum** (☎ 75 12 92; Beibitshilik 11, entrance on Abay; admission free; ☎ tours 10.30am, noon, 2.30pm & 4pm Tue–Sun) is a fascinating peep into

the pomp and circumstance surrounding the country's leader. Housed in the former presidential palace, it's a succession of supremely lavish galleries and halls decked with beautiful gifts to President Nazarbaev from foreign governments and grateful citizens. Check out the bank of Cold War-style direct-line phones in the antechamber to the presidential office itself. Tours are given in Russian but it's normally OK to stray from the group.

SOUTH OF THE RIVER

The central park on the south side of the river (reachable by a footbridge from the south end of Zheltoksan) is home to an antiquated **funfair** and the gleaming modern **Akvapark** (☎ 39 12 20; admission before/after 4pm 400/500T; ☎ 11am-8pm), with a good indoor pool with slides, and outdoor slides and pools open from around May to September. At the south end of the park, near Kabanbay Batyr, is the **Monument to the Dead of the Totalitarian Regime**, a mound with stark sculptures commemorating victims of Soviet repression. Close by is **Duman** (☎ 24 22 22; www.duman.kz; Kabanbay Batyr 4; admission 200T, oceanarium 1400T; ☎ 10am-8pm Tue-Sun), Astana's noisy modern leisure centre, with a collection of unappealing cafés and bars, Rodeo, Gladiator and Sumo rides, a 3D cinema and – what makes it worth visiting – a state-of-the-art Oceanarium with 2500 marine creatures from around the globe and a 70m shark tunnel.

ASTANA, CAPITAL OF FANTASY

First, sharks hatch out 3000km from the nearest ocean (in Astana's Oceanarium). Now, winter is turned to summer. Any Kazakhstani still unconvinced that their country was a miracle in the making had to think again at the announcement in 2006 of Astana's most fantastical project, the Khan Shatyr.

Astana already had a President's Culture Centre that is stylistically part-yurt, part-mosque; it has egg-shaped domes and green conical towers along Nurzhol bulvar; it has a throwback to pure Stalin-Gothic in the Triumf Astana apartment building on Kabanbay Batyr; it has the Bayterek monument resembling a giant soccer World Cup trophy; and it has a 61m glass-and-steel pyramid called the Palace of Peace & Harmony. Now it's getting the nearest thing to a real Xanadu-style 'pleasure dome' that humanity has ever created.

The **Khan Shatyr** (www.khanshatyr.com) will be an enormous, transparent, leaning, tentlike structure, 150m high, made of a special heat-absorbing material that will produce summer temperatures inside even when it's -30° outside. Due to open in 2008, this is to be a minicity with squares, streets, beaches, canals, shopping mall, gardens, cinemas, restaurants, pavement cafés, swimming and wave pools, beach volleyball, a concert hall and even a small golf course. Like the Palace of Peace & Harmony, the Khan Shatyr is designed by celebrated British architect Norman Foster.

This is not likely to be the last Astana surprise Nazarbaev has up his sleeve. Also planned are a 'Harvard of the Steppes' university for 35,000 students, a 390m bullet-shaped centrepiece tower of blue glass, and 740 sq km of parks and forests on previously empty steppe.

The UFO-shaped building opposite Duman is Astana's **Circus**. About 1.5km further along Kabanbay Batyr, the huge curved headquarters of the state energy company, **KazMunayGaz**, appears on the right (west), looking across a flyover and along the main showpiece axis of the new capital, 2km-long **Nurzhol bulvar**. The most daring of all Astana's architectural fantasies, the **Khan Shatyr** (see below), is going up behind KazMunayGaz.

First up on the north side of Nurzhol is the tall **Transport & Communications Ministry** – dubbed the 'Lighter' for its form by irreverent locals. Detour a block south here to the new **Islamic Centre** (☎ 9am-8pm) with a beautiful four-minaret mosque. The mosque's interior is an exquisite multidomed space with inscriptions and geometrical patterning in blue, green, gold and red.

Many of the imposing and fanciful buildings along Nurzhol bulvar are still works in progress. But a line of central gardens and plazas leads inexorably to the 97m **Bayterek monument** (☎ 24 08 35; admission 500T; ☎ 10am-10pm), a white latticed tower crowned by a large golden orb. The Bayterek embodies a Kazakh legend in which the mythical bird Samruk lays a golden egg containing the secrets of human desires and happiness in a tall poplar tree, beyond human reach. A lift glides visitors up to the inside of the golden egg, where you can ponder the symbolism, enjoy expansive views

and place your hand in a print of President Nazarbaev's palm looking eastward to the giant new **presidential palace**. The tall pyramid behind the palace is the glass-and-steel **Palace of Peace & Harmony**, home for the triennial Congress of World and Traditional Religions, hosted by Kazakhstan.

Bus 18 comes to Nurzhol bulvar from the Kongress Kholl stop in the city centre, and bus 28 come from Respubliki.

Tours

Travel agency **Sayat** (☎ 39 51 13; Druzhby 13) has a kiosk (open supposedly 9am to 7pm) outside the train station where you can join daily two-hour city tours in Russian costing 500T. **Akمولatourist** (☎ 33 08 12; tourist.astanainfo.kz; Office 22, Hotel Abay, Respubliki 33) offers a range of city tours lasting two to three hours with English-speaking guides for 24,000T to 31,000T per minibus, or 9260T to 11,100T for guide if you provide the transport.

Sleeping

Hotel prices in Astana are high. The more economical lodgings cluster near the train and bus stations. The information desk in the train station ticket hall has a list of private apartments (*kvartiri*) available from around 4000T per day. Some are within a few blocks of the station and you can look at them before deciding.

Hotel Astana (☎ 93 28 97; Gvardeyskoy Divizii 310; dm 1200-1500T, s/d 5200/6000T) Inside the west end of train station building, the Astana is charmless but clean. The dorms have up to six beds and shared bathrooms.

Hotel Saparzhay (☎ 38 11 36; Gvardeyskoy Divizii; s 2000T, d 2000-6000T) Dreary digs upstairs in the bus station, though the receptionists are friendly enough. Rooms have toilets but showers cost 200T.

Hotel Abay (☎ 93 32 96; Birzhan-Sala 3A; s 5000T, d 4600-10,000T; ☎) Decent lodgings 1½ blocks out the front of the train station, just inside a small sidestreet. The rooms are a little worn but good-sized, with phone, bathroom and TV. For under 12 hours, you pay half-price.

Hotel Saltanat (☎ 38 31 21; Akzhayyk 17; s/d 5000/6000T) The Saltanat, 500m from the train station (turn left at the intersection with the large Opera & Ballet Theatre), has neat, decent-sized rooms, recently decorated in pastel shades – half-price for under 12 hours.

Hotel Altyn-Adam (☎ 32 71 34; fax 32 23 54; Seyfullin 26; r 7000-12,000T) A good modern hotel where

the rooms have nice touches such as oil paintings, shoe-cleaning gear and glassed-in showers. The beds in the cheaper rooms are a bit of a squeeze for two. Almost 50% off for stays under 12 hours. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Munayshy (☎ 32 53 43; fax 32 51 81; Irchenko 14; r 10,000-15,000T; ☎) Little Munayshy has a great location overlooking the river. The dozen rooms are comfy, with satellite TV, breakfast and there's a billiard room for your idle moments. This is another half-day/half-price establishment.

Hotel Altyn Dala (☎ 32 33 11; altyn_dala@mail.kz; Pionerskaya 19A; s 11,000-14,000T, d 14,000-25,000T) This excellent hotel, tucked down a short street a block west of Novaya ploshchad, has cosy rooms with solid wood furniture, and a courteous reception desk. Rates include both breakfast and lunch. It's advisable to ring ahead as its 70 places can be full.

Derevnya Yegorkino (Yegorkino Village; ☎ 32 35 54; Auezov 93; r 13,000-21,000T; ☎) A charming boutique inn straight out of an old Russian fairytale, Yegorkino is upstairs from the restaurant of the same name. The colourful quilts, sink-into armchairs and carved wooden furnishings are quite unlike Astana's standard business hotels. Includes breakfast.

Comfort Hotel Astana (☎ 22 10 22; www.comforthotel.kz; Kosmonavtov 60; s/d 20,160/30,240T; ☎) South of the river, the cosy, two-storey Comfort lives right up to its name. With quiet lobby lounge, international restaurant, gym and attentive, professional service it's a tasteful retreat from the city hustle. Rates include breakfast.

Hotel Grand Park Esil (☎ 59 19 01; www.grandparkesil.kz; Beibitshilik 8; s/d 21,850/24,955T; ☎) This recently-upgraded, classically elegant hotel is right in the centre. Breakfast is included.

Okan Intercontinental Astana (☎ 39 10 00; www.ichotelsgroup.com; Abay 113; s/d from US\$309/367; ☎) Astana's most prestigious and biggest hotel, with plush rooms, several restaurants and health club with indoor pool. Breakfast included.

Eating

Arbat Burger (Respubliki 10A; dishes 300-700T; ☎ 10am-2am) Great Turkish café doling out doners, chicken fingers, burgers, *pides* and tempting sweets.

Shighis (Respubliki 8; dishes 300-800T; ☎ 9am-4am) A popular evening hangout for 20s and teens, Shighis also serves fast food slowly all day.

Samovar (☎ 32 43 16; Kenesary 24; mains 500-900T; ☎ 24hr) Cheerful Russian restaurant-café where helpful, red-silk-shirted waiters serve a good range of fare from breakfasts, *bliny* (pancakes) and soups to lunch and dinner mains.

Yamayka (Jamaica; ☎ 32 35 69; Abay 51; mains 500-900T; ☎ noon-4am) The unlikely prospect of Jamaican food in Astana is a reality here, along with Russian, Mexican and Southeast Asian dishes, eaten under grass huts and on colourful plates. Or choose the more mod second room with nightly live music.

Chelsea English Pub (☎ 21 77 27; Respubliki 7; mains 900-2700T; ☎ noon-2am) Less a pub than a restaurant with pub décor. Nor does it have English beer or much footy on the TVs. But it does serve international edibles from pasta and salads to fish and steaks, in a congenial ambience.

Tiflis (☎ 22 12 26; Imanov 14; mains 1000-2500T; ☎ noon-2am) This upscale Georgian restaurant has gone all out with its décor, right down to the mock wood porches, hay carts and waitresses decked out in traditional robes. The Georgian food is pretty good too.

Farkhi (☎ 32 18 99; Bökeykhan 3; mains 1000-2500T; ☎ noon-1am) Excellent Kazakh and Uzbek food and good service, in a beautifully decorated yurt-shaped building, with a nice garden for summer.

our pick **Derevnya Yegorkino** (☎ 32 38 78; Auezov 93; mains 1000-3000T; ☎ noon-midnight) Astana's most inviting restaurant has two floors and a garden area in authentic Russian-village style with heavy carved doors and ivy-covered timber shacks. It serves lovely Russian salads, fried field mushrooms, sturgeon sautéed in wine, and sweet pancake desserts. The cigars and Moldovan wine are a plus. It's the best place in town and an experience in itself.

Sine Tempore Mall (Beibitshilik 9; ☎ 10am-9pm) and **Ramstor Mall** (Respubliki 1; ☎ 9am-11pm) carry quality foods, including pricey Western imports, and have Western-style cafés good for snacks and drinks (600T to 1330T for good pizzas at Sine Tempore).

Drinking

Tyan Shan (☎ 31 44 95; Auezov 28; ☎ 24hr) From 5pm to 8pm Wednesday the matrons serve all-you-can-drink beer at this expat hang-out, as long as you buy 1000T worth of food (and can put up with the ear-battering live music).

Line Brew (☎ 23 63 73; Kenesary 20; 0.5L beer 800T; ☎ noon-2am) You can't miss Line Brew's ex-

traordinary, red-brick castle building. And the interior is, well, like the inside of a castle, with a tavern atmosphere. The beers are Belgian, and there's good food too.

Local teens and 20s hang out in the evening in several cafés and bars in the 'Arbat' area on Respubliki, including Arbat Burger and Shighis (p163).

Entertainment

Escape (☎ 24 37 91; Saryarka 3; women/men 1000/1500T; ☎ 11pm-5am) The hippest club in Astana, with House and fast techno on the main stage, R&B, rap and hip-hop on the second. Situated in the Kaspys sports complex.

Invision (☎ 51 64 07; City Cinema, Imanov 13; admission 500-1500T; ☎ 10pm-4am) Another two-hall club, more popular with a teenage crowd.

National Opera & Ballet Theatre (☎ 39 27 60; Akzhayyk 10) This theatre stages plenty of world classics.

Getting There & Away

From the **airport** (☎ 77 77 77), Air Astana flies daily to Almaty (20,300T), Aktau (24,300T) and Atyrau (29,200T), and twice or more weekly to Aqtöbe (24,200T), Kyzylorda (13,000T), Pavlodar (6500T), Ust-Kamenogorsk (12,000T), Petropavlovsk (5500T), Semey (9000T), Uralsk (22,000T) and Taraz (13,000T). SCAT flies daily to Shymkent (18,000T) and has further flights to Aqtöbe and Atyrau. International flights go to Amsterdam (Air Astana), Frankfurt (Air Astana and Lufthansa), Hanover (Air Astana), Istanbul (Turkish Airlines), St Petersburg (Pulkovo Airline), Tashkent (Uzbekistan Airlines), Kiev (Um Air) and Moscow (Air Astana and Transaero). There are air ticket offices at window No 10 in the **train station** (☎ 9am-6pm) and at the **Hotel Abay** (Respubliki 33; ☎ 8am-8pm).

From the **train station** (☎ 93 21 00; Gvardeyskoy Divizii), trains go to Karaganda (1500T, four hours) at least 10 times daily, Almaty (5300T, 13 to 21 hours) at least six times, Kokshetau (600T to 1700T, five hours) at least three times and Pavlodar (1400T, 8½ hours) at least twice. There are also services to Semey, Shymkent, Aqtöbe, Atyrau, Aktau, Petropavlovsk, Omsk and Moscow. The speedy, comfortable, overnight Talgo train to Almaty (13 hours), train 2, leaves at 7.15pm, costing 9400/15,800T in 3rd/2nd class. There are train ticket windows in the **main post office** (Auezov 71; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-

6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) and at **Hotel Abay** (Respubliki 33; ☎ 8am-8pm).

From the **bus station** (☎ 38 11 35; Gvardeyskoy Divizii), buses and marshrutkas run to many destinations in northern, eastern and southern Kazakhstan, including Karaganda (630T, 4½ hours, 12 or more daily), Kokshetau (1000T, five hours, 10 daily), Pavlodar (1350T, seven to eight hours, six daily), Semey (2200T, 15 hours, five daily) and Ust-Kamenogorsk (3100T, 19 hours, three daily). Shared taxis to Kokshetau and Karaganda wait outside the bus station.

Getting Around

Bus 10 (30T) runs every 15 to 30 minutes between the bus station and the airport (a one-hour trip), via Akzhayyk, Beibitshilik, Seyfullin, Respubliki and Kabanbay Batyr. A taxi between the airport and the centre is about 1500T. Buses 21, 25 and 31 run from the train station to the Kongress Kholi (Congress Hall) stop in the city centre, then south on Respubliki at least as far as Ramstor. Buses stop running about 11pm. Taxis around the central area cost 200T to 300T (400T or 500T at night).

AROUND ASTANA

About 150km southwest of the capital, **Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve** includes both virgin feather-grass steppe and numerous lakes which make it a water-bird habitat of major importance, with more than 300 species recorded. It lies at the crossroads of two major migration routes. Between April and September, salty Lake Tenghiz supports a large breeding colony of pink flamingos – the world's most northerly habitat of these graceful birds, which migrate to the Caspian Sea during winter.

The small town of Korgalzhyn, just east of the reserve, has a community ecotourism programme with comfortable **homestays** (per person room-only 800T, incl 3 meals 2125-2500T) in local homes, and guided bird-watching trips outside the reserve itself but still with plenty of lakes and interesting birdlife (guides cost around 400T per hour). Contact the EIRC in Almaty (p117) or the NGO **Rodnik** (☎ /fax 316-372 1043; oodrodnik@mail.ru; Madina 20, Office 5; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) in Korgalzhyn. Akmolaturskiy (p163) has cabins in the reserve and offers three-day guided visits for 148,000T for groups of five (206,000T for groups of 10), including accommodation, meals and transport from Astana.

Four buses or minibuses run daily from Astana bus station to Korgalzhyn (350T, 2½ hours). A taxi is 4000T (you might find one going on a shared basis for 1000T per person).

LAKE BURABAY ОЗЕРО БУРАБАЙ

☎ 31630

Situated 250km north of Astana, the Burabay area has been termed the 'Kazakh Switzerland', although the mountains qualify only as steep hills. The dense pine woods, strange rock formations and scattered lakes, however, are in stark contrast to the surrounding flat steppe. Apart from being a nice place to relax, Burabay is good for hiking, rock climbing or cross-country skiing in winter. Things might change, however: under government plans announced in 2006, Burabay is due to become one of two towns where all Kazakhstan's casinos are to be concentrated (the other is Kapshagay).

The gateway to the lake district is the tongue-twister town of Shchuchinsk. Lake Burabay is 20km north, with the village of **Burabay** (Russian: Borovoe) on its eastern shore. Here you'll find a rustic **Nature Museum** (Kenesary; admission 120T; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Tue-Sun), 1km south of the central taxi stand, with a small zoo housing two Przewalski's horses, a pair of huge maral deer, and a few bears and wolves in pitifully small cages. At the north end of the village the Burabay National Park begins at a road barrier marked Sanatori Borovoe. From here it's a pleasant 3.6km walk along the north-shore road to **Okzhetpes**, a striking 380m-tall rock pile between the lake and the tallest peak hereabouts, the 947m Kokshe.

The formation of Okzhetpes is explained by a legend that also covers **Zhumbaktas**, the Sphinx-like rock that pokes out of the water in front of it. While Abylay Khan's army was fighting the Zhungars, a beautiful princess was captured and brought to Burabay. It was decreed that she should marry a Kazakh. The princess agreed, saying whoever could shoot an arrow to the top of Okzhetpes could have her hand. All her potential suitors failed the first time, hence the name Okzhetpes which means 'Unreachable-by-Arrows'. But on a second attempt her true love hit the target. His rivals were so angry that they killed him. The distraught princess flung herself into the lake, thus creating Zhumbaktas (Mysterious Stone).

A short footpath heading north from Okzhetyes leads to a point where both Lake Burabay and the neighbouring, larger Lake Bolshoe Chebacheye can be seen.

Sleeping & Eating

Several good new hotels have popped up recently. It's also fairly easy to find private apartments or rooms (around 1000T per person): in summer *babushkas* (old women) hang around the taxi stand offering these.

Baza Otdykha Akmolaturist No 1 (☎ 317-233 02 07; Kenesary; s 2000-2500T, d 3500-4000T) By the roundabout at the entrance to Burabay from Shchuchinsk, 2km south of the central taxi stand, this little place provides cosy rooms for up to six people, with a kitchen and clean shared bathrooms. Meals are available for an extra 1500T per person. It's best to book through Akmolaturist in Astana (p163).

Baza Otdykha Akmolaturist No 2 (☎ 317-233 02 07; Shorsa 7; s/d wooden chalet 3300/5300T, ste full board 13,500/15,500T) Choose between very comfy big rooms or neat wooden cabins. All rates include breakfast. Again, best to book through Akmolaturist (p163).

Hotel Aq Bulaq (☎ 7 27 39; Kenesary 6; r without/with meals 6000/7500T) A good small hotel, with billiards and sauna, located two blocks east of the main street, towards the north end of town. In the summer season full board is obligatory (11,000T for two).

Hotel Nursat (☎ 7 13 01; bereke2030@mail.ru; Kenesary 26; r 7000-12,000T) This excellent red-brick hotel, almost opposite the Nature Museum, has bright, comfy rooms with quirky stylish bathroom fittings, plus one of Burabay's better restaurants (mains 400T to 700T).

Kafe Alina (☎ 7 20 20; Kenesary 23; mains 300-550T; ☎ 9am-1am) The most inviting little eatery in town, done out in pinks and purples and serving a decent range of salads and meat dishes.

You'll find several cafés and beer-and-shashlyk places – some open-air and summer-only – around the taxi stand.

Getting There & Away

Marshrutkas to Burabay village go from Astana bus station (900T, four hours, 9am and 11am) and from Kokshetau bus station (300T, 1½ hours, three times daily). Otherwise, go to Shchuchinsk and get a taxi (shared 150T to 200T, whole cab 500T to 1000T) or marshrutka (70T) from there to Burabay. From both Astana (800T, 3½ hours) and

Kokshetau (250T, one hour) at least 15 daily buses and marshrutkas go to Shchuchinsk; quicker shared taxis are 2000T and 600T respectively. There are also about six daily trains from both places: Shchuchinsk's station is officially called Kurort-Borovoe.

KOKSHETAU КОКШЕТАУ

☎ 3162 / pop 125,000

Though one of the country's least affluent cities, Kokshetau, 290km north of Astana, is a friendly and pleasant enough jumping-off point for the community-ecotourism homestays located in a pretty rural area to its southwest, or for Lake Burabay. Have a stroll around the central area between Abay and Auevov, where you'll find the main governmental buildings and several green park areas.

Contact the NGO **Ekos** (☎ /fax 26 64 60; akmol-ekos@mail.ru; Chapayeva 37) at the west end of town to set up a trip to the **ecotourism villages** of Ayyrtau, Imantau or Sandyktau, about 80km to 100km southwest of Kokshetau. The main attraction here is the experience of village life amid unspoiled countryside with lakes, woodlands, rocky hills and walking and riding routes, green from spring to autumn. The **homestays** (per person with 0/1/2 meals 2060/2600/3000T) are mostly in modernised village homes, with friendly families. Guides cost 360T per hour, horses 1500T to 2000T per day, and local taxis 40T per kilometre. A 48-hour visit normally adds up to between 9000T and 18,000T per person in total. Buses from Kokshetau bus station run about five times daily to Imantau, 10 times to Sandyktau and 10 times to Saumalkol, 20km northwest of Ayyrtau (there are no buses to Ayyrtau itself). It's a ride of about two hours, costing 300T, to any of the three places.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kokshetau (☎ 25 64 92; Abay 106; s 2300-4300T, d 4800-6800T; ☎) This Soviet-era hotel has dowdy rooms and a smoky smell throughout, but some of the most helpful and friendly staff in the country – plus an internet café.

Hotel Zhekebatyr (☎ 26 61 19; zhekebatyr@mail.ru; Auevov 184; s/d from 6500/8800T; ☎) The best hotel, with comfy modern rooms sporting satellite TV, a restaurant, and a sauna with spring-fed pool. Breakfast is included.

Novinka Fast Food (Kuybysheva; dishes 165-550T; ☎ 10am-11pm) Bright Turkish café with the

best pizzas in town, good pastries and no alcohol.

Kafe Classic (☎ 25 87 27; Abay 89; mains 500-800T; ☎ 11am-2am) Neat central restaurant with art on the walls and an outdoor terrace, serving good salads and meat dishes.

Getting There & Away

Kokshetau has four weekly flights to/from Almaty (24,500T). The train and bus stations are at the end of Abay, 2km east of the centre. At least three daily trains go to Astana (600T to 1700T, five to six hours) and Petropavlovsk (1500T, four hours). Cheaper but equally dawdly buses go at least 10 times daily to both places. There's also a daily bus service to Pavlodar (14 hours) and Omsk, Russia (10 hours). Bus 1 (25T) runs between the stations and town centre; a taxi is 250T.

PETROPAVLOVSK ПЕТРОПАВЛОВСК

☎ 3152 / pop 200,000

Just 60km from the Russian border, Petropavlovsk is as much a part of Siberia as of Kazakhstan and has a high Russian population. It's older and architecturally more diverse than many places in Kazakhstan.

Orientation & Information

The train and bus stations are west of the centre on Ruzaeva, at the west end of Internatsionalnaya which is the city's central axis. Konstitutsia (formerly Lenina), tree-lined and pedestrianised for much of its length, parallels Internatsionalnaya two blocks north. The main north-south streets are Mira and Zhambyl Zhabaev (not to be confused with Zhumabaev, two blocks further east).

Main post office (Pushkina) Opposite the Drama Theatre; has good high-speed internet.

Sights & Activities

The city **art museum** (Auevov; ☎ 10am-5pm), located between Internatsionalnaya and Universitetskaya, is housed in an attractive wooden villa that once belonged to a rich timber merchant. The collection includes modern and traditional paintings, and collections of *netsuke* (small wooden carvings), household objects and icons.

The **local museum** (☎ 46 20 97; Konstitutsia 48; admission 50T; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Wed-Sun), in a sturdy red-brick building near the corner of Auevov, traces Petropavlovsk's growth from its origins as a Cossack fort.

The Ishim River flows 2km east of the centre. Take trolleybus No 2 along Internatsionalnaya. On the way you'll pass the handsome, onion-domed **Russian Orthodox church**, surrounded by pretty gingerbread-style Russian cottages.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Kyzyl Zhar (☎ 46 11 84; cnr Auevov & Konstitutsia; s/d from 2500/4500T) A central location, clean rooms and friendly staff make this the best option in town.

Hotel Kolos (☎ 33 69 00; Internatsionalnaya 82; r from 3000T) A five-minute walk west of the Domino Theatre, this hotel has plain but clean rooms with TV and phone.

Doner Restaurant (Internatsionalnaya 27; dishes 200-400T; ☎ 9am-11.30pm) Near the corner with Zhumabaev, this Turkish café serves good kebabs, burgers and pizzas, and excellent desserts.

Slavyansky Dvor (Konstitutsia 52; mains 500-1000T; ☎ noon-midnight) Set in a period brick building opposite the central park, this charming bistro serves excellent fish, salads and French wine amid heavy wood tables and iron fixtures.

Getting There & Around

There are flights to Almaty (24,500T) via Kokshetau four times weekly, and to Astana (5500T) twice a week. The airport is a 15-minute taxi ride (800T) from the centre.

Trains go at least three times daily to Kokshetau (1500T, four hours), at least twice to Astana (3200T, 9½ hours) and once or more to Almaty (8000T, 31 hours). For Russia there are daily trains to Omsk (4½ hours), Yekaterinburg (Sverdlovsk; 10 to 13 hours) and Moscow (41 to 46 hours). Rail schedules here are on Moscow time (two hours behind Astana time in summer, three hours in winter).

There are around 10 daily buses to Kokshetau (800T, three hours) and five to Astana (2100T, eight hours) from the **bus station** (☎ 33 03 69), and plenty of taxi drivers willing to do a deal on rides to Kokshetau.

It's about a 20-minute walk from the stations to the centre, or take trolleybus 2 or 4 (27T) along Internatsionalnaya.

KARAGANDA ҚАРАҒАНДА

☎ 3212 / pop 410,000

Smack in the steppe heartland, 220km south-east of Astana and 1000km northwest of Almaty, Karaganda (Kazakh: Qaraghandy)

is famous for two things: coal and labour camps. The two are intimately connected, as the big 'KarLag' network of Stalin-era camps around Karaganda was set up to provide slave labour for the mines. At its peak the KarLag system extended over an area larger than France. Prison labour also built much of Karaganda itself, which was founded in 1926.

Mining in the area continues today, with the remaining mines owned by the Indian-owned, Europe-based Mittal Steel, to feed its steelworks at Temirtau, 25km north of Karaganda.

Karaganda's population has shrunk by 100,000 since the Soviet collapse, with many ethnic-German residents (descendants of Stalin-era deportees) departing for Germany. But it's a pleasant city, with avenues of trees and a large central park providing greenery, and the downtown revived with shopping malls, cafés and restaurants.

Orientation

The train and bus stations are beside each other at the south end of the city centre. Bukhar Zhirau (formerly Sovietytsky), the main street, heads north through the centre from here, flanked by several shopping malls, with the spacious central park to its west. Parallel to Bukhar Zhirau are Voynov-Internatsionalistov (one block west), and Yerubaev and Gogol, one and two blocks east.

Information

CATC (☎ 41 28 26; cat-karaganda@alarnet.com; Office 29, Bukhar Zhirau 55) Good agency for flight tickets. The entrance is from the Qaynar shopping centre on Voynov-Internatsionalistov.

Gogol Library (☎ 56 76 55; Yerubaev 44; ☎ 9am-6pm) The 'American corner' upstairs has internet and English-speakers. Also internet on the ground floor.

Internet Kafe Traffik (Bukhar Zhirau 46; internet per hr 210-270T; ☎ 9am-9pm) Efficient, comfortable place with a fax service too.

Sights & Activities

The **Karaganda Ecological Museum** (☎ 41 33 44; www.ecomuseum.freemnet.kz; Bukhar Zhirau 47; admission unguided/guided 100/300T; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat), run by a dedicated environmental NGO, has to be the most imaginative museum in the country. Everything can be touched and this includes large rocket parts that have fallen on the Kazakh steppe after Baykonur space

launches, and debris collected from the Semy Polygon (p175). The guided tours, available in English, are well worth it. The entrance is beneath an 'Ortalyqkazhzerqoynany' sign at the side of the building. The museum can also arrange tours to sites of ecological interest/problems in Kazakhstan, including Lake Balkhash, the Semy Polygon and Baykonur Cosmodrome, with English-speaking guides. Typical price: US\$60 to US\$90 per person per day.

The renovated **Karaganda Oblast Museum** (☎ 56 31 21; Yerubaev 38; admission 200T; ☎ 9am-6pm) includes a Russian-language video of the town's history, plus a section on Gulags. Guided tours (300T) in English or Russian add significantly to the interest.

In winter you can ice-skate at the **Shakhter Stadium** (northern Bukhar Zhirau; per 2hr 200T; ☎ noon-10pm Fri-Sun) – real local fun!

Sleeping & Eating

Lyux-Otel Gratsia (☎ 41 24 59; fax 41 24 43; Voynov-Internatsionalistov; s/d with shared shower 1600/3200T, r with bathroom 4400-6000T) Good-value budget place with comfy, quite bright rooms. It's a blue-painted building behind the City Mall shopping centre.

Hotel Karaganda (☎ 42 52 04; Bukhar Zhirau 66; r 2200-9000T) With a convenient central location and a range of rooms at different prices, this suits many people. It's nothing fancy but adequate. Rooms have hot water, telephone and TV.

Hotel Chayka (☎ /fax 41 53 26; Krivoguz; s 4300-6700T, d 6500-8000T, VIP r 14,000-16,500T; ☎ ☎) Plush hotel built in 1982 for the Soviet-era elite including cosmonauts and rock stars, and still in fine nick. Rooms have balconies, satellite TV, soft furnishings and include breakfast. It's just north of the central park.

Bon Appetit (Abzal shopping centre, mid-Bukhar Zhirau; mains 120-450T; ☎ 10am-9pm) Bright, spacious eatery in the back of the Abzal. Offerings range from *manty* and strogonoff to pizza and spaghetti. Try the tasty Korean soup *kuksi*.

Johnnie Walker Pub (☎ 41 19 08; Bukhar Zhirau 36; dishes 750-2200T; ☎ noon-1am) Haggis in Karaganda? This Scottish pub serves burgers, steaks, fish and chips and of course the Scottish national dish.

Entertainment

Fabrick (☎ 56 11 21; Loboda) and **Klondayk** (cnr Mira & Gogol) are stylish clubs playing a mix of Russian

and Western dance music. Entry ranges from 1000T to 2000T.

Dvoretz Kultury (Bukhar Zhirau 32) This ornate blue theatre is the top venue for ballet, opera and concerts.

Getting There & Around

Karaganda has daily flights to/from Almaty (19,000T), plus flights to Moscow four times weekly, and weekly flights to Frankfurt and Hanover by Air Astana.

The **train station** (☎ 43 36 36) has services to Almaty (4100T, nine to 17 hours) at least seven times daily; Astana (1500T, four hours) at least nine times; and to Pavlodar, Kokshetay, Petropavlovsk, Taraz and Shymkent at least daily. The Talgo Astana-Almaty fast train (p164) stops here but tickets don't go on sale until two hours before departure.

Destinations served from the **bus station** (☎ 43 18 18) include Astana (630T, 4½ hours, hourly, 7am to 7pm), Pavlodar (1600T, eight hours, six daily), Almaty (2800T, 20 hours, one daily) and Semy, Shymkent and Ust-Kamenogorsk (all daily). Minivans (1000T) and shared taxis (1500T) outside the bus station will whisk you to Astana in 2½ hours.

Trolleybus 1 and bus 26 run north along Bukhar Zhirau from the stations.

AROUND KARAGANDA

At **Spask**, the site of a KarLag camp 35km south of Karaganda, is a huge mass prisoners' grave beside the Almaty highway, with eerie groups of three crosses scattered around the site and monuments installed in the 1990s by countries whose nationals died here (including France, Japan, Poland, Latvia and Lithuania). A taxi there and back should cost around 1500T from Karaganda.

Dolinka village, 35km southwest of Karaganda, was the administrative headquarters for the whole KarLag system. The old officers' club is now the village's main shop and a modest **KarLag Museum** (☎ 321-565 82 22; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) is housed in the old KarLag hospital. Marina Ivanovna, the museum's director, should be able to show you round the now-empty headquarters building, with its basement holding cells. Get to Dolinka by Shakhtinsk-bound bus 121, leaving Karaganda bus station about every 10 minutes. Get off at the Vtoroy Shakht stop after about 45 minutes (130T), take a taxi into Dolinka (200T, 1.5km) and ask for the *muzey* (museum).

EASTERN KAZAKHSTAN

Ust-Kamenogorsk, a relatively prosperous regional capital, is the gateway to the Altay Mountains – one of the most beautiful corners of Kazakhstan but one for which you need to plan ahead because a border-zone permit is required (see p172).

The region's other main city, Semy, is one of Kazakhstan's most historically interesting places but suffers from the effects of Soviet nuclear testing in the nearby Semipalatinsk Polygon.

UST-KAMENOGORSK (ÖSKEMEN) УСТЬ-КАМЕНОГОРСК (ӨСКЕМЕН)

☎ 3232 / pop 320,000

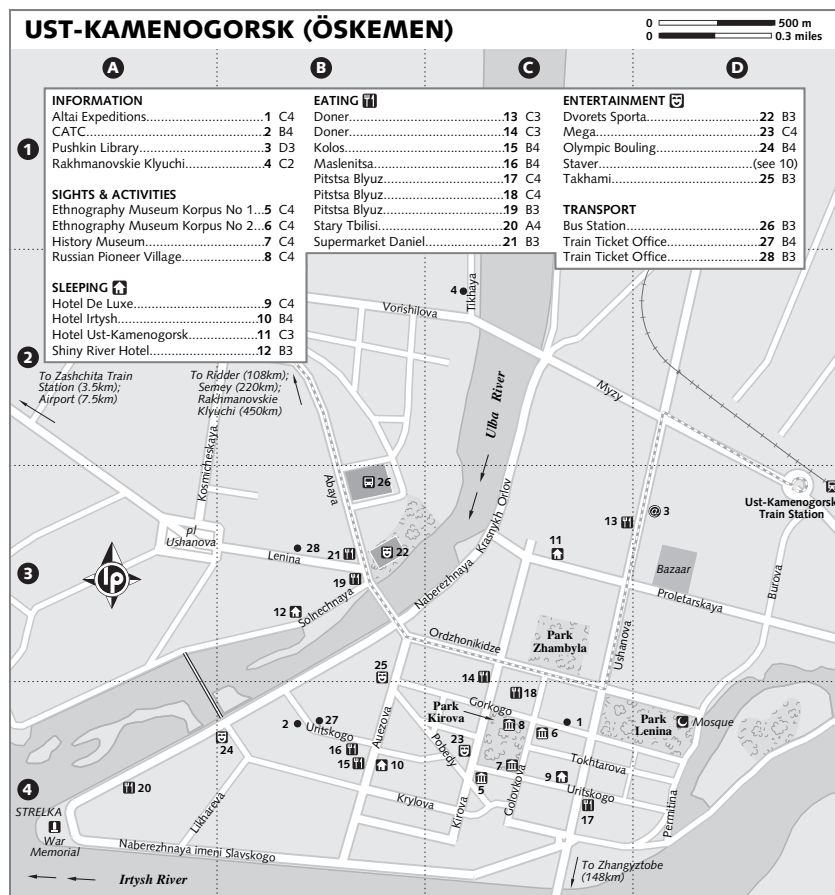
Ust-Kamenogorsk (Kazakh: Öskemen), 800km north of Almaty, is a fairly lively city with generally low-key Soviet architecture, at the confluence of the Irtysh and Ulba Rivers. Founded as a Russian fort in 1720, Ust-Kamenogorsk has grown from a small town since the 1940s when Russians and Ukrainians began arriving to mine and process local copper, lead, silver and zinc. These industries still keep the city out of the economic doldrums, but are bad news for air quality: Ust has a high rate of respiratory infection.

Orientation

Central Ust-Kamenogorsk is focused on pretty Park Kirova. The main streets are Ushanova, running north from the Irtysh bridge to the bustling bazaar; Kirova, two blocks west; and Ordzhonikidze, which crosses them both leading to the main bridge across the Ulba. Across the Ulba, Ordzhonikidze splits into Abaya and Lenina. The bus station is a short distance along Abaya, while the main train station, Zashchita, is 5km northwest along Lenina, and the airport 4km further in the same direction.

Information

Altai Expeditions (☎ /fax 24 57 09; altai_expeditions@dmn.kz; Office 115, Gorkogo 46) Run by experienced, enthusiastic, English-speaking Andrey Yurchenkov, Altai Expeditions offers a big range of active trips and nature tours in the Altay, plus day trips to a Bronze Age astronomical complex and other intriguing sites outside Ust-Kamenogorsk. Email for the current trip list: a wide-ranging two-week Altay tour, for example, starts at around US\$700 per person.



Pushkin Library (☎ 26 13 33; www.pushkinlibrary.kz; Ushanova 102; internet per hr 180T; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) You can access the internet on the ground floor or in the American Culture Center or German information centre upstairs.

Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi (☎ 55 21 00; www.altai-travel.ru; Tikhaya 11) This travel firm owns the Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi health resort (p172) near Mt Belukha, and offers foot and horse treks in the Altai, plus rafting, skiing and snowboarding elsewhere in the region.

Sights

Clustered around pretty **Park Kirova** (☎ 7am-7pm) are some of Ust-Kamenogorsk's oldest buildings and several worthwhile museums. The **Ethnography Museum** (admission per branch 100T; Korpus No 1 ☎ 26 85 29; Uritskogo 67; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-

Sun); Korpus No 2 ☎ 26 31 59; Gorkogo 59; ☎ 9am-6pm), with traditional costumes, carpets, musical instruments, yurts and icons, is in two buildings facing corners of the park. The good **History Museum** (☎ 25 54 60; admission 150T; Uritskogo 40; ☎ 9am-5pm) has a ground-floor natural history section with stuffed regional wildlife including a snow leopard and a giant Maral deer (the antlers of which are considered an aphrodisiac in Korea), and interesting history exhibits upstairs that reveal a huge number of old burial mounds in the region. In the northern part of the park itself is a replica **Russian pioneer village** (admission 50T; ☎ variable) of log cabins, furnished and decorated in period style.

It's nice to take a walk beside the Irtysh or Ulba to the **Strelka**, where they meet,

marked by a large Heroes of the Soviet Union memorial.

Sleeping

Hotel Irtysh (☎ 25 29 12; fax 25 09 85; Auezova 22; r 2500-12,000T; ☎ ☎) With its range of rooms at different prices, this place fits the bill for most travellers. All rooms are adequately comfortable and have at least shower, phone and cable TV. Rates include breakfast. The receptionists are amiable, and the hotel also offers currency exchange, ATM, business centre, restaurant, 24-hour café and air ticket office.

Hotel Ust-Kamenogorsk (☎ 26 18 01; fax 26 16 03; Proletarskaya 158; s/d 4500/7000T) This is similar to Irtysh, but less welcoming.

Shiny River Hotel (☎ 27 25 25; fax 27 14 18; Solnechnaya 8/1; s 9500-23,000T, d 12,500-27,000T; ☎ ☎) New in 2006, this excellent hotel overlooks the Ulba with tasteful, modern rooms, and a classy, expensive restaurant (main dishes around 2000T). English is spoken, and breakfast is included.

Hotel De Luxe (☎ 24 09 93; alex2000@ukg.kz; Uritskogo 28A; s/d 16,500/20,500T; ☎) This brand-new, 17-room hotel was on the verge of opening at the time of research and is sure to be a good-quality option.

Eating

Maslentsa (☎ 25 09 00; Uritskogo 117A; dishes 100-400T; ☎ 9am-11pm) The house speciality, meat-and-cheese-stuffed *bliny* are unique in this neck of the woods. It's a trendy place under the same ownership as the equally popular **Pizza Blues** and, does a big choice of soups, salads and main dishes.

Doner (dishes 200-400T) Kirova (☎ 26 87 04; Kirova 49; ☎ 9am-10pm); Ushanova (Ushanova; ☎ 10am-10pm) Colourful and busy Turkish café serving doners, burgers, shish kebabs and good Middle Eastern sweets: you may have trouble finding a lunchtime seat at the downtown branch.

Pitssta Blyuz (Pizza Blues; pizzas 300-700T; ☎ 11am-11pm) Gorkogo (☎ 24 81 67; Gorkogo 56); Lenina (☎ 27 11 01; Lenina 1); Ushanova (☎ 25 23 66; Ushanova 64) Highly popular local chain serving pretty good pizza and salads, and great cakes, in clean, bright surroundings. Upstairs at the Ushanova branch is **Kofe Blyuz**, a coffee lounge with free wi-fi.

Stary Tbilisi (☎ 25 63 92; Krasnykh Orlov naberezhnaya 117A; dishes 800-1000T; ☎ 11.30am-1am) Pretty Georgian restaurant decorated with grapevines over stone and brick walls. Especially nice in summer when you can sit outside facing the Ulba.

The two best supermarkets, both well stocked, are **Supermarket Daniel** (Abaya 1/1; ☎ 24hr) and **Kolos** (Auezova 15; ☎ 24hr).

Entertainment

SPORT

Olympik Bowling (Krylova 93; per game 500T; ☎ 3pm-4am Mon-Fri, 1pm-4am Sat & Sun) A fun hang-out with 10 lanes, this claims to be the biggest bowling centre in Kazakhstan.

From September to April, don't miss **Kazzinc Torpedo** (www.kazzinc-torpedo.kz) at the **Dvoretz Sporta** (☎ 27 22 50; Abaya 2; admission 250-300T). One of the top ice hockey teams in the former Soviet Union, Torpedo have produced a number of NHL players. They play in both the Russian and Kazakhstan championships. Look for posters outside the stadium: face-off is usually at 6.30pm.

NIGHTCLUBS

Mega (☎ 57 00 00; Kirova 31; admission 1000T; ☎ 8pm-5am) This popular club plays Russian pop in between the techno, and they spray foam to dance in every once in a while. The floor has a raised platform in the centre and bars at the sides.

Takhami (Auezova 47; ☎ from 7pm) With lots of chrome and an illuminated red dance floor, Takhami attracts singles as well as couples and is good for meeting people. Mainstream pop and dance music starts around 11pm.

Staver (☎ 25 29 27; Hotel Irtysh, Auezova 22; women/men 300/500T, Fri & Sat 1000T; ☎ from 10pm) Disco-bar with a reasonably mature crowd including couples, playing mainly Russian and Western pop. Some nights there are dance shows.

Getting There & Away

From the **airport** (☎ 42 84 84) there are daily flights to Almaty (18,500T to 25,000T), four a week to Astana (12,000T) and two to Moscow. SCAT flies to Bayan-Ölgii, Mongolia (14,000T), on Wednesday. Buses 2 and 39 run to the airport from Auezova in the centre. A taxi costs around 1000T. A good ticket agency is **CATC** (☎ 25 28 50; cat-oskemen@alarnet.com; Uritskogo 123).

From the **bus station** (☎ 27 26 26; Abaya) buses and marshrutkas run several times daily to Semey (900T, four hours), and a few times to Astana (3100T, 19 hours), Almaty (3100T, 22 hours), Katon-Karagay (900T, nine hours), Pavlodar (2100T, 13 hours), Barnaul (2400T, 12 hours) and Novosibirsk (3600T, 17 hours). Shared taxis to Semey from the bus station cost 2000T – most leave in the morning.

Buses to China also go from the bus station. At the time of research there was a daily service to Ürümqi (3500T, 15 hours) crossing the border at Bakhty east of Makanchi, and a bus at 6pm Wednesday and Sunday to Altay, China (4725T, 24 hours) via the border at Maykapshagay. Ticket office staff say these buses are open to third nationalities, but you should double-check, and make sure you have all necessary paperwork.

Ust-Kamenogorsk's main train station is **Zashchita** (☎ 40 87 37). The main line heads north into Russia to meet the Semey-Novosibirsk line, with trains every two days to Barnaul and Novosibirsk. It takes at least 11 hours to reach Semey this way and you need a Russian visa and possibly a double-entry Kazakh visa to do so, so it's much better to go by road. For trains heading south, get a bus (400T, three hours) or shared taxi (1200T) from Ust-Kamenogorsk bus station to the train station at Zhanqytobe, 150km southwest. From here trains leave for Almaty (16 to 18 hours) at noon and 7.45pm (subject to change). You can buy tickets for these at Ust-Kamenogorsk's **train ticket offices** (Uitiskogo 80 ☎ 25 70 96; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-4pm Sun; Lenina 4 ☎ 27 28 77; ☎ 8am-7pm). Coming from the south by train, get off at Zhanqytobe and you'll find Ust-Kamenogorsk-bound taxis and maybe buses waiting there.

Getting Around

From outside the bus station, trams 1, 2, 3 and 4 (20T) run to Ordzhonikidze and Ushanova on the east side of the Ulba; buses 6, 8 and 35 (40T) will take you to Auezova for the Hotel Irtysh.

ALTAY MOUNTAINS АЛТАЙ

In the far eastern corner of Kazakhstan the magnificent Altay Mountains spread across the borders to Russia, China and, only 50km away, Mongolia. At the time of research you still needed a border-zone permit (see opposite) to go beyond the village of Uryl in the Bukhtarma Valley, or to visit the Markakol Nature Reserve to the south.

The hassle of getting to this sparsely-populated region is well worth it. Rolling meadows, snow-covered peaks, forested hillsides, glaciers, pristine lakes and rivers, an array of archaeological sites and rustic villages with Kazakh horsemen riding by make for scenery of epic proportions. Asian

legends refer to 4506m Mt Belukha, a twin-headed peak on the Kazakh-Russian border, as Shambhala, 'a paradisaical realm that will be revealed after humanity destroys itself'.

Due to the permit requirements and scarcity of public transport, it makes sense to visit the area with the help of a good travel company such as Altai Expeditions or Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi (p169). These firms can obtain the border-zone permit for you in 30 to 45 days for around US\$15 to US\$20. Speedier processing (10 to 12 days) may be possible for around US\$50.

Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi

The charming health resort of Rakhmanov's Springs is 30km up a mountain track from the village of Berel and 450km from Ust-Kamenogorsk (a 10- to 12-hour drive). It was built in the 1960s by a mining company, but is now privately owned by the Rakhmanovskie Klyuchi company (p169). You'll find wooden cottages, some with kitchen, linked by boardwalks through pine forests, nestling in a mountain valley. This is the perfect base for exploring the Altay valleys, mountains, rivers, lakes and passes. Mt Belukha can be seen from the Radosny Pass, a one-hour walk up from the resort. From July to September the resort offers a variety of one- to two-week group horse and foot treks, and ascents of Belukha, costing from €160 to €360 per person. Check with the company about shorter trips. In winter there's cross-country skiing.

Accommodation per person per day, including meals, runs from 5200T to 19,500T depending on the room, plus around 7500T for bus or minibus transport there and back. There are packages for 12-day stays.

Near Berel you can visit the Scythian burial mounds where in 1997 archaeologists discovered the amazingly preserved body of a 4th-century BC prince, buried with several horses and carriages.

Lake Markakol

This beautiful 38km-long lake is at the heart of the Markakol Nature Reserve, south of Katon-Karagay village. The lake, 1500m above sea level and surrounded by forests and 3000m-plus mountains, is noted for its pure waters and is a great winter ice-fishing spot. Altai Expeditions (p169) specialises in trips here, with fishing and horse trekking among the possibilities. In summer the lake can be

ABAY, CULTURAL GURU

Writer, translator and educator Abay (Ibrahim) Kunanbaev (1845–1904) was born on the northern fringe of the Shyngghystau hills south of Semey. Son of a prosperous Kazakh noble, he studied both at a medresa in Semey and later in a Russian school there. This education opened him to ideas far beyond the traditional Kazakh compass. His later translations of Russian and other foreign literature into Kazakh, and his public readings of them, as well as his own work such as the philosophical *Forty-one Black Words*, were the beginning of Kazakh as a literary language and helped broaden Kazakhs' horizons.

Abay valued Kazakh traditions but was also decidedly pro-Russian. 'Study Russian culture and art – it is the key to life,' he wrote. In Soviet times, Abay's reputation was 'officially licensed' by Moscow, and his Russophile writings were enshrined. Today he is the number one Kazakh cultural guru.

reached by the 'Austrian Rd', a hairy 4WD mountain track from Katon-Karagay, built by Austrian POWs during WWI. At other times access is by a much longer southern route via Kurchum, crossing the Bukhtarminsky Reservoir by ferry.

SEMEY (SEMIPLATINSK) СЕМЕЙ (СЕМИПАЛАТИНСК)

☎ 3222 / pop 292,000

Semey, 200km down the Irtysh from Ust-Kamenogorsk, is sadly better known to the world by its Russian name Semipalatinsk. Between 1949 and 1989 the Soviet military exploded some 460 nuclear bombs in the Polygon, an area of steppe west of the city. Locals say they knew when tests were taking place because the ground would shake – often on Sunday morning. An unprecedented wave of popular protest, the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, was largely instrumental in halting the tests in 1989. Short-term visitors are not considered to be at any risk, however the bomb effects live on: radiation has taken a severe toll on the health of many thousands of people in Semey and beyond (see p111).

Despite its Soviet-generated sufferings, Semey is one of Kazakhstan's more interesting cities. Set in the territory of the Middle Horde, noted for their eloquence and intellect, the city and area have produced several major Kazakh writers and teachers, notably the national poet Abay Kunanbaev (1845–1904). In 1917 Semey was the capital of the short-lived Alash Orda independent Kazakhstan government.

Like Ust-Kamenogorsk, Semey was founded, in 1718, as a Russian fortification against the Hungarians. In the 19th century, writer Fyodor Dostoevsky was among several democracy-minded Russian intellectuals

who spent years of exile here. Their presence spurred a flowering of arts and learning among educated local Kazakhs.

Semey today is one of Kazakhstan's more economically depressed cities, but the centre is steadily brightening up with new stores and restaurants. A multimillion-dollar suspension bridge across the Irtysh, funded with Japanese loans, gives the place a modern skyline.

Orientation

The Irtysh flows northwestward across the city, with nearly everything of use or interest on its northeastern side. The main streets, slicing across town from southwest to northeast, are Shakarima and Internatsionalnaya ulitsa. The bus station is on Valikhanov three blocks northwest of Shakarima, next to the busy bazaar; the train station is just off the north end of Shakarima, 2km from the centre.

Information

Internet Tsentr (Momyshuly 4; internet per hr 120T; ☎ 9am-10pm) Central internet access.

Istok (☎ 52 48 99, 333-3685554; istok@sems.kz; Office 108, Lenin 4) Local environmental NGO; can organise tours of the area. English-speakers may be available.

Shara (☎ 52 48 71; shara@relcom.kz; Office 203, Shugaeva 4) Travel agency offering tours of the city and area with English-speaking guides for US\$10 per hour plus transport.

Sights MUSEUMS

The big, domed **Abay Museum** (☎ 52 24 22; Lenin; admission 125T; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-5pm) is dedicated to the 19th-century humanist poet Abay Kunanbaev (see boxed text, above). Along with displays about Abay's life, the museum has



sections on the Alash Orda government and his literary successors, including Mukhtar Auezov (1897–1968), author of the epic Kazakh novel *Abay Zholy* (The Path of Abay). Free guided tours are available, but in Russian or Kazakh only.

The well laid-out **Dostoevsky Museum** (☎ 52 79 42; Dostoevskogo 118; admission 100T; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) is on a leafy street a block east of Abay ploshchad, built beside the wooden house where the exiled writer lived from 1857 to 1859 with his wife and baby. The museum displays Dostoevsky's life and works, covering his childhood in Moscow, residence in St Petersburg, five years in jail at Omsk, five years of enforced military service at Semey, and his creative life from 1860 to 1881. The rooms where he lived have been maintained in the style of his day, and the vast amount of images of Dostoevsky alone makes it worth a visit, even if you can't understand the mainly Russian text. Tours, in Russian or Kazakh, cost 150T.

The **History & Local Studies Museum** (☎ 52 07 32; Lenin 5; admission 100T; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Sat) has a small display on nuclear testing and the Nevada-Semipalatinsk Movement, material

on regional history, and a collection of traditional Kazakh artefacts. Founded by Russian exiles in 1883, this claims to be the oldest museum in Kazakhstan.

The large **Fine Arts Museum** (Pushkin 108; admission 100T; ☎ 10am–5.30pm Tue–Sat) has some good works by Kazakh, Russian, and Western European painters from the 16th century onwards, including a not-to-be-missed Rembrandt etching.

OLD SEMEY

Looking somewhat forlorn on a concrete island beside Abay is one of the **fort gates** built in 1776, flanked by a couple of cannons. The blue-and-gold-domed Russian Orthodox **Voskresensky Sobor** (Resurrection Cathedral) stands 300m further along the street. This is the oldest part of Semey and the streets northeast of here have many old one-storey wooden houses.

The **Anet Baba Kishikuly Mosque** (Abay 48), 400m beyond the Fine Arts Museum, was built by Tatar merchants in the 19th century in distinctly Russian-influenced style. It boasts twin minarets and a pillared interior with a big chandelier. Bus 35 runs along here.

IRTYSH RIVER

There's a curious collection of **Communist statues** – a kind of graveyard of Lenin and Marx busts, presided over by the giant Lenin from the nearby square, northwest of the Hotel Ertis and past the Dastar cinema.

Polkovnichy Island is reached by the bridge next to Arlan Bowling on Abay. Just over 1km from the bridge on the left is a sombre yet grandiose **nuclear memorial** erected in 2002 for victims of the nuclear tests. The marble centrepiece of *Stronger than Death* is a mother covering her child; above billows a Polygon mushroom cloud etched into a 30m-high black tombstone.

Sleeping

Hotel Semey (☎ 56 36 04; hotsemey@rel.com.kz; Kabanbay Batyr 26; s/d with shared bathroom 1000/1600T, with private bathroom 3500/4800T or 5400/6000T) Hotel Semey has old-fashioned Soviet-style rooms but is well enough kept, even if hot water is only available a few hours a day. Reception staff may tell you that only the largest 'lyux' rooms are available, but persistence will probably uncover a cheaper vacancy. There are two cafés and a restaurant.

Hotel Ertis (Hotel Irtysh; ☎ 56 64 77; Abay 97; s/d with shared bathroom 1500/2000T, s with private bathroom 3000T, d with private bathroom 4000–10,000T) A gloomy, 11-storey second choice if the Semey is full. No hot water for the cheap rooms.

Hotel Binar (☎ 52 39 34; fax 56 15 58; Lenin 6; s 4500–20,000T, d 6500–13,000T; ☎) This low-key, two-storey place is the cream of Semey's hotel crop, just a block from Abay ploshchad. The rooms are cosy, carpeted and well-furnished, and breakfast and use of the sauna is included in the price.

Eating

Istanbul Picnic (☎ 56 08 89; Momshuly 3; dishes 100–400T; ☎ 9am–11pm) This bright, popular, downtown Turkish café serves reasonably good doners, *plov*, *shashlyk* and vegetarian lentil soup.

Kofeman (☎ 56 55 38; Internatsionalnaya; dishes 150–600T; ☎ 10am–1pm) Semey's fashionable coffee lounge, also doing English and Mexican breakfasts, souvlaki, pasta and *bliny*. The latte is a true work of art!

Traktir Yolki-Palki (☎ 52 57 47; Ibraev 147; mains 400–850T; ☎ 9am–1am) Behind the heavy wooden street door are two relaxed, tavernlike rooms where you can enjoy traditional Russian cook-

ing (including breakfasts) as well as a big variety of drinks.

Restoran Eldorado (☎ 52 58 42; Shakarima; mains 500–1000T; ☎ 10am–midnight) With a calm ambience and tasteful landscape paintings, this is one of the nicest places to eat. You can choose Chinese as an alternative to the mainly Russo-European fish and meat dishes.

Entertainment

Kafe Solyanka (☎ 56 31 35; Baysetov 48; admission after 6pm 200–300T; ☎ 24hr) Vivacious café with a warm atmosphere and live pop musicians from 6pm. It's in the side of the larger Rahat Palace restaurant.

Vostok (Momshuly; ☎ 11am–midnight) There's more live pop nightly at this popular teens-and-20s hang-out. Downstairs is an informal café; upstairs is a restaurant with 200T admission in the evenings.

Getting There & Away

From the **airport** (☎ 44 36 77), 17km south of the city, there are five weekly flights to Almaty (16,000T) and three to Astana (9000T). **Avia Agentstvo** (☎ 56 57 69; Shakarima; ☎ 9am–6pm) sells air and train tickets.

From the **bus station** (☎ 52 09 25; Valikhanov), 12 daily buses and marshrutkas run to Ust-Kamenogorsk (800T to 1100T, five hours), four to Pavlodar (1200T, five to six hours), three to Astana (2200T to 2430T, 15 hours) and one to Taldyqorghhan (1790T, 14 hours). Others go at least daily to Karaganda, Zaysan, Barnaul and Omsk. Quicker shared taxis to Ust-Kamenogorsk or Pavlodar gather here too.

The **train station** (☎ 98 32 32) has three or four daily departures to Almaty (3500T, 20 to 22 hours), and trains every two days to Pavlodar (1400T, eight hours) and Astana (2800T, 17 hours) and most days to Barnaul (4300T, 12 to 16 hours) and Novosibirsk (5600T, 16 hours).

Getting Around

Buses 11 and 13 run from the train station to the centre along Shakarima. From the theatre on Abay ploshchad, bus 35 runs to the bazaar and bus 50 to the bus station.

AROUND SEMEY Kurchatov

Kurchatov, 120km west of Semey and known locally just as Konechnaya (The End), was the command centre for the Semipalatinsk

Polygon. The nuclear testing zone itself stretched some 100km to 120km south and west from Kurchatov. Today, the semideserted town is home to Kazakhstan's **National Nuclear Centre** (Natsionalny Yaderny Tsentr; ☎ 322-512 33 33; www.nnc.kz; Lenina 6), which, among other things, works on the development of nuclear power in Kazakhstan.

Trains and buses go to Kurchatov from Semey, but unless you have organised it in advance you may have trouble getting into the gruesome **museum** (admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri), the only real reason to visit the place. The museum has a model of the first test site, where aircraft, buildings, metro tunnels and live animals were placed close to 'ground zero' to test the explosion's effects. Animal parts are pickled in formaldehyde.

It would be very dangerous to enter the Polygon itself without special equipment including radiation suits and a Geiger counter, despite the fact that it is frighteningly unsupervised. Explosion sites and radiation hotspots are not marked and local people even wander over the area grazing livestock and collecting firewood.

Ask about the travel info for Kurchatov from the **Semey Akimat** (City Hall; ☎ 322-2526230, 5230 04; Rm 436, Government House, Kozbagarov, Semey), Karaganda Ecological Museum (p168), the Ust-Kamenogorsk travel firm Altai Expeditions (p169) or the National Nuclear Centre (see above).

PAVLODAR ПАВЛОДАР

☎ 3182 / pop 330,000

A further 320km down the Irtysh valley from Semey, on the road to Omsk in Russia, Pavlodar was developed as an industrial town in Soviet times. Its skyline is dominated by massive, rabbit-hole-style Soviet-era apartment blocks, but quiet Lenina on the western edge of town has pre-Soviet character and a few good museums.

The Irtysh forms the western boundary of the city, with the main street, Satpaeva, running parallel a couple of blocks east. Kutuzova, 1.5km further east, is another north-south axis. Toraygyrova runs across the north ends of both streets, continuing 300m east past Kutuzova to the bus and train stations.

Sights

Pavlodar's not-to-be-missed sight is the **Mashhur Zhusip Mosque** (nr Kutuzova & Krivenko), the biggest mosque in Kazakhstan, built in 2001.

Looking like an intergalactic space station from a 1950s sci-fi film, it rises out of the city with rocketlike 68m-high minarets and a green dome shaped like Darth Vader's helmet. The attendants are welcoming and will show you the expansive main prayer hall (women must view this from the upper gallery).

The beguiling **Bogaev Museum** (☎ 32 12 10; Lenina 200; admission 50T; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri), set in the one-storey wooden home of a local photographer and humanitarian, shows off early-20th-century photographs of life around Pavlodar. Bogaev (1884-1958) had a keen eye for traditional Kazakh culture, often hiding in bushes to capture his subjects. He won local fame for creating the city's first museum, and taking photos of young soldiers before they went off to war. Nearby, the **History Museum** (☎ 32 37 06; Lenina 147; admission 50T; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) takes the Pavlodar story right through from sabre-tooth tigers to the latest religious architecture.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Sariarka (☎ 56 18 27; Toraygyrova 1; s 2200-7900T, d 4400-8300T) This 12-storey block overlooking the Irtysh has been modernised but it still has that old Soviet feel even though the staff are friendly enough and some speak some English. Still, all rooms have bathrooms with hot showers, and breakfast is included. There are four places to eat and an air-ticket office, too.

Hotel Kazakhstan (☎ 32 05 20; Satpaeva 71; r 4300-7800T; ☎ ☎) Has just 20 or so excellent, good-sized, renovated rooms with satellite TV, modern bathrooms and breakfast included. Two imposing black lions flanking the entrance enhance that secure feeling.

Dilizhans (☎ 32 12 73; nr Yestaya & Frunze; pizza 250-700T; ☎ 24hr) Fast-food joint near the Hotel Kazakhstan with a fetish for road signs. You can chart your progress from Astana on the giant ceiling map.

Café Africa (☎ 32 45 11; Satpaeva 75; dishes 300-800T; ☎ 11am-1am) The ochre-painted walls and tribal art are tasteful, less so the caveman-style outfits worn by the waitresses. Still, this trendy locale between the Kazakhstan and Nurtau hotels is a pleasant oddity in Pavlodar, with platters full of spicy meat or fish. The hookahs are a bonus.

Getting There & Around

There are daily flights to Almaty (23,200T) and a weekly flight to Moscow (37,000T).

Eight daily buses run to Semey (1200T, five to six hours), three continuing to Ust-

Kamenogorsk (2160T, 10 to 11 hours). Five go to Astana (1350T, seven to eight hours). Mini-buses outside the train station offer quicker rides to Astana for 1500T.

Trains run at least twice daily to Astana (1400T, eight to nine hours), once or more to Almaty (6700T, 28 to 33 hours) and every two days to Semey (1400T, eight hours). There are also services to Omsk, Novosibirsk and Moscow (57 hours) in Russia.

City buses 10 and 22 run from the train and bus stations to Satpaeva.

KAZAKHSTAN DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

The improving economy and large business-travel sector have brought the opening of many luxurious new hotels and the upgrading of many old ones, especially in cities touched by the oil boom. If you have US\$50 to US\$200 per night to spend on a room, you can enjoy comfortable, well-equipped, tasteful accommodation and good service. For budget travellers, unrenovated Soviet-built hotels are the main option. They're generally adequate but down-at-heel. Some cities have cheap dorms (*komnaty otdykha*, literally rest rooms) in their train stations.

One blessing is that some hotels, often better-class ones, offer discounts of up to 50% if you occupy the room for not more than 12 hours, a period known as a *pol-sutki*.

ACTIVITIES

Southeast and East Kazakhstan, with their high mountains along the Kyrgyz, Chinese and Russian borders, offer the greatest

outdoor excitement. There's good hiking, horse riding and even mountain biking in the Zailiysky Alatau south of Almaty (p130 and p134), in the central Tian Shan (p137 and further east, and in Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve (p146). From Lepsinsk (p139) you can hike in the Zhungar Alatau mountains, and further north are the gorgeously beautiful Altay Mountains (p172) on the Kazakh-Russian border. Ascents of Belukha in the Altay, and Khan Tengri and other peaks in the central Tian Shan, are superb challenges for climbers in July and August.

Skiers and snowboarders enjoy Central Asia's best facilities at the modern Chimbulak resort (p130) south of Almaty, from approximately November to April, with the famous giant outdoor ice-skating rink at Medeu nearby. Amazing summer heliskiing is possible on the glaciers of the central Tian Shan.

Rafters can tackle the Ili River below Kapshagay (p138) and the Uba and Ulba Rivers near Ust-Kamenogorsk (p169). The delta where the Ili enters Lake Balkhash is the country's best and most varied fishing area, while Lake Markakol (p172) offers great winter ice-fishing.

Bird-watchers should make for Aksu-Dzhabagly Nature Reserve, the Zailiysky Alatau and the Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve (p165) – the world's most northerly flamingo habitat.

Some local agencies specialising in active tourism are listed on p117 and p169. The EIRC in Almaty (p117) is another good source of assistance.

CUSTOMS

On arrival or departure you must fill in a customs declaration if you are carrying cash worth more than US\$3000.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Kazakhstan Embassies in Central Asia

Kazakhstan has embassies in Tashkent (Uzbekistan; p262), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan; p345), Ashgabat (Turkmenistan; p436) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan; p392).

Kazakhstan Embassies & Consulates in Other Countries

Kazakhstan's diplomatic missions abroad include the following (see www.mfa.kz for an updated list of all Kazakh embassies):

PRACTICALITIES

- Local broadcasting and press are in Russian and Kazakh, but TVs in better hotels often receive international satellite channels such as CNN and BBC World. Caspionet is a local channel with some (very dry) news in English.
- Local English-language papers such as the *Almaty Herald* and *Kazakhstan Monitor* are pretty thin on news.

Afghanistan (☎ 020-70284296; sher@ceretechns.com; House 10, 10th St, Wazir Akbar Kham, Kabul)

Azerbaijan (☎ 12-465 6521; embassyk@azdata.net; 889-82 Hassan Aiev, Baku)

Canada (☎ 416-593 4043; www.kazconsul.ca; Suite 600, 347 Bay St, Toronto M5H 2R7)

China Beijing (☎ 10-6532 6182; www.kazembchina.org; 9 Dong 6 Jie, San Li Tun, 100600); Visa & Passport office in Ürümqi (☎ 991-381 5796; kazpass@mail.xj.cninfo.net; Kunming Lu 31) Consulate in Shanghai (☎ 21-6275 2838; www.kazembchina.org; Room 1005/1006, Orient International Plaza, 85 Loushanguan Rd 200336)

France (☎ 1-4561 5200/06; www.amb-kazakhstan.fr; 59 rue Pierre Charron, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-4700 7111; www.botschaft-kazakhstan.de; Nordenstrasse 14-17, 13156 Berlin) Consulates in Bonn, Frankfurt, Hanover and Munich.

Hong Kong (☎ 2548 3841; www.consul-kazakhstan.org.hk; Unit 3106, 31-fl, West Tower, Shun Tak Centre, 200 Connaught Rd Central, Sheung Wan)

Iran (☎ 21-256 5933; www.kazembassy-iran.org; 4 North Hedayat St, Corner of Masjed Alley, Darrus, Tehran)

Japan (☎ 03-3791 5273; embkazjip@gol.com; 9-8, Himonya 5-chome, Meguro-ku, Tokyo 152-0003)

Mongolia (☎ 97611-31 22 40; kzemba@ombx.mn; Dom Diplomator 95-11 Mongol Uls, Ulaan Baatar)

Netherlands (☎ 070-361 6990; kazakhstan

-consul@planet.nl; Mauritskade 37, 2514 HE Den Haag)

Pakistan (☎ 51-226 29 25; embkaz@isb.comsats.net.pk; House 10, Street 19, F-8/2, Islamabad)

Russia Moscow (☎ 495-927 17 10; www.kazembassy.ru; Chistoprudny bulvar 3A, 101000) Consulate in Astrakhan (☎ 8512-25 18 85; www.kazembassy.ru; ulitsa Akvarelnaya 2B, Astrakhan; 414056) Consulate in Omsk (☎ 3812-32 52 13; kzconsul@omskcity.com; ulitsa Valikhanova 9); Consulate in St Petersburg (☎ 812-312 09 87; kazconsulspb@mail.ru; ulitsa Galernaya 11)

Singapore (☎ 65366100, 65361407; www.kazakhstan.org.sg; 10 Collyer Quay, 13-10/11 Ocean Building, Singapore 049315)

UK (☎ 020-7581 4646; www.kazakhstanembassy.org.uk; 33Thurloe Sq, London SW7 2SD) Consulate in Aberdeen (☎ 01224-622465; kazcon@btconnect.com; 10 N Silver St, Aberdeen AB10 1RL)

USA (☎ 202-232 5488; www.kazakhembus.com; 1401 16th St NW, Washington DC 20036)

Embassies & Consulates in Kazakhstan

Many embassies have moved to Astana or are in the process of moving, and many of the others have representative offices there. Many countries are also maintaining consulates or offices in Almaty. In the following listings main missions are given first.

Afghanistan Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-2242946; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok C-10); Almaty office (☎ 327-292 79 42; af_embassyalmaty@yahoo.com; Rimskogo-Korsakova 8/1)

Australia (Map p114; ☎ 327-277 7879; gaslink@bigpond.com; 9th-fl, Al-Farabi 5/2A, Almaty)

Azerbaijan (Map p160; ☎ 317-224 15 81; www.azembassy.kz; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok C-14, Astana)

Canada (Map p114; ☎ 327-250 11 51/52; geo.international.gc.ca/canada-europa/kazakhstan; Karasay Batyr 34, Almaty)

China Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-224 13 90; fax 24 13 81; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok 2); Almaty office (Map p114; ☎ 327-2700223; Baytasov 12)

France Almaty (Map p114; ☎ 327-258 25 04/08; www.ambafrance-kz.kz; Furmanov 173); Astana office (Map p160; ☎ 317-2580884; Respubliki 25)

Germany Almaty (Map p114; ☎ 327-250 61 55/57; www.almaty.diplo.de; Furmanov 173); Astana office (Map p160; ☎ 317-2241482; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok C-12)

Iran Almaty (Map p114; ☎ 327-254 19 74; iranembassy@itte.kz; Lugansky 31-33); Astana office (Map p160; ☎ 317-224 25 11; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok B-7)

Japan Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-297 78 43; www.kz.emb-japan.go.jp/jp; 5th fl, Presidential Plaza Bldg, Kosmonavtov 62); Almaty office (Map p114; ☎ 327-298 06 00; Qazybek Bi 41)

Kyrgyzstan Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-224 20 24; kr@mail.online.kz; Diplomaticheskyy Gorodok V-5); Almaty consulate (Map p114; ☎ 327-291 66 10; gen.consul.kz@mail.ru; Lugansky 30A)

Mongolia (Map p114; ☎ 327-220 08 65; monkaze@kazmail.asdc.kz; Aubakirov 1, Almaty) Near Kargalinka sanatorium.

Netherlands (Map p114; ☎ 327-250 37 73; www.nlembassy-almaty.org; Nauryzbay Batyr 103, Almaty)

Pakistan (Map p114; ☎ 327-273 35 48;

parealmaty@yahoo.com; Tölebaev 25, Almaty)

Russia Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-222 2 483; www.rfembassy.kz; Baraeva 4); Almaty consulate (Map p114; ☎ 327-274 61 22; cons.rf@nursat.kz; Zhandosov 4) Uralsk consulate (☎ 311-2511626; rusconsul@nursat.kz; Oktyabrskaya 78)

Tajikistan Astana (Map p160; ☎ /fax 317-224 13 15; Marsovaya 15, Mikrorayon Chubary); Almaty office (Map p114; ☎ /fax 327-269 70 59; Sanatornaya 16, Mikrorayon Baganashyl) The Almaty office is in the south of the city: take bus 63 or marshrutka 526 or 537 south from Furmanov as far as the Vodozabornaya stop on Al-Farabi (the second stop after Kazgu, the state university). Walk west along Al-Farabi and turn left (south) at the traffic light after 100m. The consular section is 100m up this road, on the left-hand side.

Turkmenistan Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-228 08 82; tm_emb@at.kz; Otyrar 64); Almaty consulate (Map p114; ☎ /fax 327-2509604; cnr Abay 76/109 & Auezov)

POST-SOVIET NAME CHANGES

Most Kazakh cities now have Kazakh names instead of their Soviet-era Russian names. In many cases these are close to the Russian (eg Almaty instead of Alma-Ata). Less obvious changes include Astana for Tselinograd, Aktau for Shevchenko, Taraz for Dzhambul and Atyrau for Guriev. In some cases, mostly in the north, Russian names have beaten off the Kazakh challenge: most people still talk of Uralsk, not Oral, and Ust-Kamenogorsk is more common than Öskemen. Semey is still routinely called Sempalatinsk by Russian-speakers.

Most city streets also have new Kazakh names. These may just be a Kazakhisation of a Russian name (eg Lenin köshesi instead of Lenina ulitsa) or they may be something completely different. Sometimes Kazakh and Russian appear side-by-side on street signs. To confuse things further, Russified spellings of new Kazakh names (eg Kabanbay for Qabanbay) are quite common too. Meanwhile, many local people continue to use the old Soviet names in any case.

In this chapter we use the names that are most commonly used.

UK Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-255 62 06; www.britishembassy.gov.uk/kazakhstan; 6th fl, Renco Bldg, Kosmonavtov 62); Almaty Office (Map p114; ☎ 327-2506191; Furmanov 173)

USA Astana (Map p160; ☎ 317-2702100; www.usembassy.kz; Bldg 3, 23-22 ulitsa, Mikrorayon Ak Bulak 4) Almaty office (Map p114; ☎ 327-2507612; Zholdasbekov 97)

Uzbekistan (Map p114; ☎ 327-291 78 86, 291 02 35; fax 91 10 55; Baribaev 36, Almaty)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The biggest festivities around the country are for Nauryz, the Muslim spring/equinox festival on 22 March, with traditional sports, music festivals and family get-togethers. Shymkent is a particularly good place to be for Nauryz (see p144). Around 10 to 15 August, a festival of traditional sports and foods is staged by Kazakh and Kyrgyz livestock herders in the remote Karkara valley east of Almaty.

HOLIDAYS

1 & 2 January New Year.

7 January Russian Orthodox Christmas.

8 March International Women's Day.

22 March Nauryz (see p450).

1 May Unity Day.

9 May Victory Day.

30 August Constitution Day.

25 October Republic Day.

16 December Independence Day.

Variable Qurban Ait (Islamic Feast of Sacrifice; the last day of the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca).

INTERNET ACCESS

All medium-sized and bigger cities have public internet facilities, charging generally 150T to 300T per hour. Just here and there you'll find a café or bar with wi-fi access.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Caspian Information Centre (www.caspianinfo.org) News and research on Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan Embassy in London (www.kazakhstanembassy.org.uk) Has a range of information on the country and some helpful links.

UNDP (www.undp.kz) Good resource on varied topics.

Unesco (www.unesco.kz) Unesco's Almaty office is its Central Asia headquarters and this site has many useful links.

MAPS

The best source of topographical maps of Kazakhstan's regions is GEO in Almaty (p116).

MONEY

Prices in this chapter are given in the currency they are normally quoted in – usually tenge (T) but occasionally US dollars or euros.

You will find changing, extracting and wiring money easier in Kazakhstan than anywhere else in the region. ATM cards are definitely the way to go. There are machines in every city and most small towns – at banks, shopping centres, supermarkets, hotels and some train stations. Look for 'Bankomat' signs. Most accept Maestro, Plus, Cirrus, Visa and MasterCard, with instructions in English. Kazkommertsbank, Halyk Bank and Turan Alem Bank all have widespread ATMs.

You can make purchases with credit cards (Visa and MasterCard preferred) at a fair number of shops, restaurants, hotels and travel agencies. There is often a surcharge for doing so.

Bring a little cash (euros or US dollars) to start out and as a fallback if you run out of tenge. Exchange offices (marked 'Obmen Valyuty') are common on city streets.

You can change travellers cheques (denominated in US dollars or euros; Amex is the most widely accepted brand) for a 2% fee (usually with a US\$2 minimum) at some banks. Kazkommertzbank and Halyk Bank are most dependable.

Tenge notes and coins are 10,000, 5000, 2000, 1000, 500, 200, 100, 50, 20, 10, five, two and one.

At the time of research, exchange rates were as follows:

Country	Unit	=	Tenge
Australia	A\$1	=	105T
Canada	C\$1	=	116T
China	Y1	=	17T
euro zone	€1	=	177T
Japan	¥10	=	11T
Kyrgyzstan	1som	=	3T
New Zealand	NZ\$1	=	92T
Pakistan	Rs 10	=	22T
Russia	R10	=	51T
UK	UK£1	=	262T
USA	US\$1	=	128T
Uzbekistan	100S	=	10T

POST

Airmail letters under 20g to anywhere outside the CIS cost 150T. A 2kg parcel of books by surface/airmail costs around 2600/4500T (depending on the destination).

If you have anything of importance to post it's generally safer and quicker to use an international courier firm. **DHL** (www.dhl.com) has a particularly wide network of drop-off centres around the country.

REGISTRATION

The aggravating requirement to register your passport with the migration police (OVIR) has been effectively done away with for most travellers in Kazakhstan. For the 28 nationalities on the 'economically developed and politically stable' list (see opposite), registration may be carried out when visas are issued at a Kazakhstan embassy or consulate, and all nationalities should have their passports automatically registered at the country's international airports, at Aktau port, and at land borders (although you may have to insist at smaller border points). Two entry stamps (one is not enough) on your migration card are the indication that registration has taken place and is valid for 90 days. If for some

reason you don't get registered on arrival and you are staying more than five days, you need to register within five calendar days of entering. Many hotels and travel agencies can do this for you for a fee of US\$20 to US\$30, or you can spend time going to the local office of OVIR where registration is free.

Unfortunately the rules are open to different interpretations and while very few travellers experience any problems, the only 100% watertight way of avoiding them is to register, which is easy in most main cities except Almaty, where OVIR has even refused to register passports, saying it is not necessary.

Check the latest situation when you get your visa and again when you reach Kazakhstan.

TELEPHONE & FAX

You can make phone calls for cash from some Qazaqtelekom offices, from call offices signed 'Peregovorny Punkt', and from some shops and kiosks with phones for public use. From a Qazaqtelekom office or *peregovorny punkt*, local calls are generally free, while other calls within Kazakhstan cost 10T to 25T per minute, calls to Kazakhstan mobile numbers and other ex-Soviet states around 50T per minute, and other international calls are 200T to 300T per minute.

To use a street phone (*taksofon*), you need a *taksofon* card (*taksofonaya karta*), sold at some newsstands, kiosks and Qazaqtelekom offices. These cost around 130/250/350T for 25/75/125 units. On local calls you get about one minute per unit. Slot the card into the phone, wait till the display stops changing, then dial your number. Important: when the number answers, press the button next to the lips symbol so that they can hear you.

For long-distance calls, dial the long-distance prefix 8 before the country code (if it's an international call), city code and local number. If you're calling another town in the same *oblys* (14 administrative regions), replace the first three digits of the city code with a 2.

You can cut costs for long-distance and international calls by using a Nursat i-Card or a Luxtelecom card, mostly sold at shops and kiosks selling mobile-phone cards (of which there are many). With these cards you scratch clear a PIN on the back, then dial a local access number given on the card. Instructions are then available in English.

You can't use these cards on street phones; you *can* use them from private phones, some hotel rooms, mobile (cell) phones and usually call offices and kiosks. Nursat i-cards cost 700T, 1400T or 2100T: calls cost about 20T per minute to Kazakhstan mobile phones, 30T to other Kazakhstan and ex-Soviet numbers, 35T per minute to the UK, US, Canada or Germany and 125T per minute to most other places.

Almost everyone in Kazakhstan has a mobile phone. Mobile numbers have 10 digits and to call them you must dial the long-distance access code, 8, first. To use your own mobile in Kazakhstan, get it unlocked for international use before you leave home, then it will cost 1000T to 2000T to get a new SIM card activated by a Kazakhstan mobile-phone network such as Beeline, Kmobile or KCell. Mobile-phone offices and shops are everywhere. You add credit by buying cards with PINs or through some ATMs.

Calls from hotel rooms are typically double the call-office rate.

Fax services are available from some Qazaqtelekom offices and internet cafés, and many hotels. Sending a one-page fax typically costs 50T to 100T within Kazakhstan and around 250T to Europe or North America.

TRAVEL PERMITS

Special permits (sometimes called a *propusk*) are needed for sensitive border areas in eastern Kazakhstan, notably the Altay Mountains, Lepsinsk and Khan Tengri. Tour agents should be able to arrange such permits, if their services are used to visit the restricted areas, but processing can take up to 45 days.

Entry to some national parks and nature reserves also requires a permit, usually arranged quickly through the local park office, for a fee of 200T to 300T.

VISAS

One-month, single-entry tourist and business visas can usually be obtained at Kazakhstan consulates or embassies *without* a letter of invitation (LOI) if you are from any of 28 'economically developed and politically stable' countries: the EU pre-enlargement 15 plus Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, Liechtenstein, Malaysia, Monaco, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, South Korea, Switzerland and the USA. Required documentation usually includes your passport (not a photocopy),

a letter from you explaining the purpose of your visit, a photo and an application form available from the Kazakhstan Foreign Ministry website (www.mfa.kz – go to 'Consular Information') and often on embassy websites. A few consulates, such as Shanghai, still insist on genuine hotel bookings, in which case it will be easier to obtain an LOI.

For visas of more than one month or more than one entry, or if you are not from one of the 28 countries mentioned above, you must obtain 'visa support' in the form of a LOI. This is available through many travel agencies in Kazakhstan (see p117), Central Asia specialist travel agencies in other countries or Kazakh businesses that are organising your visit. In your application to the embassy or consulate you need to submit your invitation's official reference number, and often a copy of the invitation itself (fax or email copies are fine). Allow two to three weeks to obtain the LOI before you apply for the visa itself. Agents' fees for obtaining LOIs normally range from around US\$30 to US\$70 depending on the visa required (more for urgent processing).

Fees for the visa itself vary from one consulate to another. A single-entry, one-month tourist visa, for example, costs UK£23 in London, €27 in Madrid and US\$105 in Washington. Urgent processing is usually available at extra cost.

Single-entry, one-month visas are also available with an LOI on arrival at Almaty, Astana, Atyrau, Uralsk and Ust-Kamenogorsk airports. Fees, payable in cash (US dollars), are US\$40 to US\$70 for a tourist/business visa. A photograph will be required and a form has to be filled in on the spot. When you request an LOI from a travel agency for this purpose, tell them why: not all agencies can provide LOIs suitable for visas on arrival.

Transit visas for up to five days in the country are available for US\$25 on arrival at Almaty airport if you can show an original onward air ticket (no LOI needed). It's best to verify this regulation before departure. At Kazakh embassies and consulates, transit visas may be issued based on air or train tickets into and out of the country and an onward visa: fees range from UK£13 in London to US\$95 in Washington.

Some consulates, including those in London and Washington, will deal with visa applications by mail; others may require you

to apply for and collect your visa in person. Processing time at consulates in the West is normally three to five working days.

Kazakhstan's visa rules are modified from time to time. Recommended travel agents and websites of Kazakhstan embassies and its Foreign Ministry usually have up-to-date information.

If you are in a country without a Kazakhstan embassy or consulate (such as Australia, Ireland, New Zealand or Sweden), you can apply to Kazakh missions in other countries – London and Washington are usually the best bets. Visa agents will do the legwork for fees of around US\$50 to US\$70 per visa plus courier charges and the visa-processing costs. To save money, consider getting visas in countries en route to Central Asia.

See 'Visas for Onward Travel' in other countries' Directory sections in this book for information on obtaining Kazakhstan visas in other Central Asian countries. In Baku (Azerbaijan), one-month, single-entry tourist visas are issued the same day for US\$40. The Kazakh embassy in Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, is best avoided as it charges particularly high fees. Travellers report that one-month Kazakh tourist visas cost around US\$30 in China. Most recent information is that the embassy in Beijing is open for applications from 9am to noon on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Go just before 9am with your passport, a photocopy and one photo, and you should be able to pick up the visa at 4.30pm the same day. In Ürümqi it may be possible to get visas the same day, or you may have to go back next time the office opens (normally only for a few hours twice a week). The Ürümqi office also has a habit of moving.

Copies

You are supposed to carry your passport with your visa in it, and your migration card, at all times to show to police or military on demand. To avoid the security problems of always carrying these valuable documents on your person, your embassy or consulate will usually be able to provide free certified copies to carry around instead. These will be acceptable in most cases.

Extensions

Extending a Kazakh tourist visa is only possible with a medical certificate saying you are unable to travel. Business visas can be

extended through many travel agencies: fees start around US\$50.

Visas for Onward Travel

For contact details of embassies and consulates in Kazakhstan, see p178.

Afghanistan Thirty-day tourist visas (US\$30) processed in three days in Almaty. Agents will charge double.

China In Almaty one-month, single-entry visas cost US\$30 to US\$40 and take five working days. An LOI may be required. The office opens for visa applications and issuance from 9am to noon Monday, Wednesday and Friday: be prepared for long queues. For costlier rapid service apply on Monday: your visa will be ready on Wednesday. Using an agent is much easier: Stantours (p117) can get your visa in five working days for US\$90.

Kyrgyzstan Almaty is the best place in Central Asia to get a Kyrgyz visa. The consulate accepts applications from 10am to 1pm Monday to Thursday (get there at 9.30am to minimise queuing time). Take your passport and one photo. A one-month tourist visa takes three working days for US\$45; urgent service (picking up between 3pm and 5pm the same day) is US\$90.

Pakistan Three-month visas issued in two days.

Russia Get your Russian visa before you leave home. Like most Russian missions in Central Asia, the Almaty consulate is a headache. You have to supply originals of all documents, including an invitation, which may or may not be accepted. Transit visas may only be available to drivers of cars (not even their passengers). Things are slightly better at the embassy in Astana and the consulate at Uralsk, where processing is normally three working days, but you still need to provide original documents, possibly requiring courier fees to have them sent by a sponsor in Russia.

Tajikistan Tourist visas are issued the same day in Almaty but an LOI from a Tajik travel agency (available from many agencies in Almaty) is usually required. One/two/four weeks costs US\$80/100/120. The office is open 10am to 6pm Monday to Friday: apply in the morning. Normal processing is half-price but takes 12 working days.

Turkmenistan To get a Turkmen visa here you either need to book a tour through a travel agency, or have an onward visa enabling you to get a transit visa. You'll have to go in person with your passport to the embassy or consulate. Procedures are easier in Astana, Tashkent and Dushanbe, where the embassies are more used to transit travellers, than in Almaty.

Uzbekistan Some Almaty travel agents can provide Uzbek LOIs hassle-free if given enough time (US\$35 for about two weeks at Stantours). The embassy accepts applications from 2pm to 4.30pm Monday to Thursday. Go at 1pm, put your name on a list and you'll probably get in before the door closes around 4pm. Visas are issued on the spot if you apply with an LOI. Uzbekistan's no-LOI option

for some Continental European nationalities and Japan is not always respected here: if an application without LOI is accepted, you will usually have to come and queue again after three working days. Tourist visas cost US\$55/65/75 for seven/15/30 days, US\$95 for three months: for more than one entry, add US\$10 per entry. US citizens pay US\$100 for any visa. Transit visas, available without LOI if you have an onward visa to any neighbouring country, are US\$35 for 72 hours, and normally take three working days.

TRANSPORT IN KAZAKHSTAN

GETTING THERE & AWAY Entering Kazakhstan

Once a bureaucratic nightmare, the entry procedures into Kazakhstan are streamlined these days. Bribery is no longer common, although the road border between Tashkent and Shymkent can be problematic (see p184). On arrival you fill in a migration card, which should be stamped to show that your passport has been registered (see p180). Keep this card in your passport: you must hand it in when you leave the country.

Air

AIRLINES & AIRPORTS

Kazakhstan has steadily improved air connections with the outside world. The two biggest and busiest airports are at **Almaty** (☎ 327-270 33 33; www.alaport.com) and **Astana** (☎ 317-277 77 77; www.astanaairport.kz). Almaty has direct international flights to at least 25 cities in Europe and Asia, on airlines including KLM, British Airways, Lufthansa, Turkish Airlines, China Southern, Transaero and the Kazakh-and-British-owned Air Astana. Astana has direct flights to Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Hanover, Istanbul, Kiev, Moscow and St Petersburg. Uralsk, Atyrau and Karaganda also have direct flights to Western Europe. Aktau is the main hub for trans-Caspian flights; Ust-Kamenogorsk has flights to Bayan-Ölgii (Mongolia). All these cities, plus Shymkent and Kyzylorda, have flights to Moscow and often other CIS cities too.

For other Central Asian cities, Almaty has flights to Tashkent (US\$185) daily by Uzbekistan Airlines, and Dushanbe five times weekly by Tajikair or SCAT. From Astana, Uzbekistan Airlines flies weekly to Tashkent (US\$230).

DEPARTURE TAX

There is no departure tax when leaving Kazakhstan.

For regularly updated schedules, visit www.centralasiatourism.com. See p127 for airline contact details in Almaty.

Land

BORDER CROSSINGS

To/From China

Few hassles from officialdom are reported these days at either Khorgos (the main road crossing) or Dostyk (the rail crossing), though waits can be long.

From Almaty's Sayran bus station, sleeper buses are scheduled to Ürümqi (5900T, 24 hours) at 7am daily except Sunday, and buses to Yining (3900T, 12 hours), about 100km from the border, at 7am Wednesday and Saturday. Departures are not always reliable, however. An alternative is to take a bus or minibus to Zharkent, 40km before Khorgos, then a taxi (about 600T) or minibus to the border, and a taxi from there to Ürümqi. The crossing is usually crammed with Kazakh and Uyghur families and traders with vast amounts of baggage. If you're coming from Ürümqi, note that the bus tickets are not sold at the bus station there but in the Bian Jiang Bing Guan hotel in the southern part of Ürümqi.

The Zhibek Zholy (Silk Road) train departs Almaty-II station for Ürümqi at 10.59pm Saturday (a Kazakh train) and Monday (a Chinese train). It's scheduled to take 30 hours, crossing the border at Dostyk (Druzhiba). Kupeyny (2nd-class couchette) tickets cost 8500T. The return train gets into Almaty-II at 5.58am Monday and Wednesday. The trains have restaurant cars but it makes sense to bring some of your own food and drink too. At Dostyk, you have to wait several hours while the train bogies are changed and customs checks take place. The train toilets are locked during this time except for the 20-minute dash between the Kazakhstan and China border posts: get in line early for this!

The trains can get fully booked two weeks in advance. From Almaty the Monday train is particularly popular and tickets on free sale are rare. You can save trouble by booking through an agent: Stantours (p117) charges US\$10 to

US\$15 for the service, plus any late-ticket surcharges (typically US\$20). The international ticket office at Almaty-II opens from 8am to 1pm and 2pm to 7pm. You may have to show a Chinese visa when buying a ticket.

From Ust-Kamenogorsk in eastern Kazakhstan, there are buses to Ürümqi and the Chinese town of Altay. See p171 for details.

To/From Kyrgyzstan

Official Kazakh–Kyrgyz border crossings are largely hassle-free.

Seven daily buses and a similar number of minibuses (600T to 700T), as well as shared taxis (2000T to 2500T), make the four- to five-hour run to Bishkek from Almaty's Sayran bus station, crossing the border at Korday. There are also overnight buses all the way to Cholpon-Ata and Karakol from Sayran, and minibuses to Bishkek from Taraz (500T, five hours).

No public transport makes the Karkara valley crossing, south of Kegen, Kazakhstan, and east of Tüp and Ken-Suu, Kyrgyzstan, but from about April to October you can get through by a combination of hitching, taxi and patience (see p137).

Trekkers and mountain bikers making the haul across the mountains between Almaty and Lake Issyk-Köl should note that there is no official crossing point so it's impossible to get a passport stamp. Consult a trekking agency before setting off.

To/From Russia

There are many road crossings between Kazakhstan and Russia. For train and bus connections, see p468 and city sections in this chapter.

To/From Turkmenistan

There is a remote border point 200km south of Zhanaozen, which is a two-hour marshrutka ride east of Aktau. From the border it's 50km south to the Turkmen town of Bekdash and a further 200km to Turkmenbashi. The roads are very rough for about 50km each side of the border. There's no public transport from either side – expect to pay about 6000T for a taxi from Zhanaozen to the border, and US\$40 from the border to Turkmenbashi. Vehicle queues at the border can be long.

To/From Uzbekistan

The main road crossing is at Chernyaevka between Shymkent and Tashkent. This is an unpredictable border: some travellers breeze

through, others have taken five hours. There are reports of corruption on both sides, especially the Kazakh side. If it looks bad, consider paying 1000T to 1500T to one of the 'facilitators' hanging around the border. The border is open 8am to 10pm (Astana/Almaty time).

Shared taxis and marshrutkas to the border (500T, one to 1½ hours) depart from Shymkent's Kolos bus stop – see p144.

Daily trains run from Aqtöbe, Aralsk, Kyzylorda and Turkistan to Tashkent via the border point at Saryagash. Coming from Almaty you can meet these trains at Arys, 60km west of Shymkent.

Another road and rail crossing exists between Beyneu, western Kazakhstan, and Kungrad, Uzbekistan. Self-driving readers have reported that the road is poor and little used but the crossing is hassle-free. Uzbek customs is in Kungrad. Daily trains run from Beyneu to Kungrad (10 hours; customs are done on the train), and on Saturday and Wednesday (from Beyneu) train 332, coming from Saratov (Russia) via Atyrau (Kazakhstan), continues to Tashkent via Nukus and Samarkand.

Sea

BORDER CROSSINGS

To/From Azerbaijan

A sea ferry between Aktau and Baku, Azerbaijan, leaves about every seven to 10 days (cabin berth 7800T to 10,000T, about 18 hours) – see p157 for more details. This service is reportedly less comfortable and less regular than the Baku–Turkmenbashi ferry.

GETTING AROUND

Air

A good network of domestic flights links cities all round Kazakhstan and fares are reasonable. The main airlines are **Air Astana** (4L; www.airastana.com), a Western-style, Kazakh-British joint venture; and **SCAT** (DV; www.scats.kz in Russian), a Kazakh airline flying prop-driven Russian planes. SCAT is significantly cheaper on many routes. For flight schedules see www.centralasiatourism.com.

Buses

Bus services are fairly good except in western Kazakhstan. Most intercity buses are modern, and generally a little cheaper and faster, and often more frequent, than a 2nd-class train ride. A typical bus trip costs 125T per hour (50km to 60km). Quality of intercity roads generally isn't

bad, but for trips of more than five or six hours trains are usually more comfortable.

Marshrutkas, Minibuses & Taxis

For many trips up to four or five hours, assorted marshrutkas, minibuses and shared taxis offer an alternative. They're generally found waiting outside bus and train stations. Marshrutkas and minibuses usually cost a little more than buses; shared taxis are double or triple.

Train

Train travel is a good way to meet people and get a feel for the country's terrain and vast

size. Ticket queues can be slow and it's best to buy your ticket in advance. All cities have downtown train booking offices, identified by the words Zheleznodorozhnaya Kassa (Russian) or Temir Zhol Kassasy (Kazakh), where you can buy tickets at a small commission without having to schlep to the station. Take your passport when buying tickets.

A few train lines between Kazakhstan cities – such as Semey–Ust-Kamenogorsk, Aqtöbe–Uralsk and Aqtöbe–Kostanay – pass through Russian territory and you may be asked for a Russian transit visa on these legs. Ask beforehand about the latest situation.

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