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Geography and Public Life

HOW TO GET AROUND KAZAKHSTAN

It is difficult to speak of a country the size of Western Europe by applying geographic standards that are understood by Europeans. Kazakhstan is a country that is five times the size of France or nine times the size of Germany—at least, as the propaganda of the Soviet age liked to reiterate. Countries that are comparable with Kazakhstan in terms of territory, climate and geography are Canada and Australia.

Indeed, Kazakhstan is somehow comparable with an entire continent, or a giant island, cast into the depths of Eurasia. Its main and central part is comprised of plains and steppes, while its natural borders are the Siberian forests in the north, the Caspian Sea in the west, deserts and the Aral Sea in the south and mountains in the east. You can find many varied landscapes in Kazakhstan, from lush oasis to Martian desert, from alpine meadows to enormous canyons. Naturally, it is no easy matter travelling over such a vast area. Nevertheless, the entire country is served by an extensive transport and communications network.

The traditional modes of transport, the horse and the camel, have long since made way for other, more contemporary means of travel, yet over small distances on a local scale these creatures continue to be used to great effect as irreplaceable and ecologically-friendly assistants to us humans. Of course, for the tourists wishing to immerse themselves in the romanticism of the steppe, a saddled horse can always be found as also, if one tries, can a camel.

Kazakhstan is rich in fauna, including the bear, wolf and fox. The last tiger was seen back in 1936, in the River Ili floodplain near Lake Balkhash, but it is hoped these beautiful striped predators still reside among the rushes of the great rivers Ili and Syr-Daria.
There are those who hunt bear in the Altai Mountains and wolves just about everywhere. Wolf numbers have risen in recent years to such an extent that their control has now become a state problem. Those fearful about meeting a wolf face to face can always take a helicopter. Arabian princes made it a custom to travel to Kazakhstan to hunt with falcons. This is an ancient and exotic form of hunting but those prepared to equal the money paid by Arab sheikhs are catered for. In the troubled and chaotic times of the 1990s falcon smuggling was a profitable business, but the government gradually managed to put this house in order and these birds now grace the native expanses with their hunting scream, seeking out the fox, wolf or hare, the main prey in hunting with falcons; the larger prey being hunted with golden eagles.

For the fishermen, Kazakhstan boasts charming places for any kind of fishing (excluding the outlawed pastime of fishing with dynamite). A fisherman’s dream of catching a half-ton beluga, bursting with tens of kilogrammes of caviar was, until recently, a very achievable goal. The Aral Sea, a pearl in the desert, has become catastrophically shallow and scientists have even described it as history’s worst ecological disaster at the hands of humans. In the Caspian Sea the so-called caviar mafia, using the universal disorder that followed the fall of the USSR, brought the sturgeon to almost total extinction and international organizations announced a moratorium on the sale of Caspian caviar. However, in recent years some progress is visible, with Kazakhstan succeeding almost independently, but with some international support, in reviving its part of the Aral Sea, transformed into desert by the economic activity of the Soviets, involving wasteful cotton and other irrigation projects. Fish have now returned to the Aral Sea and soon the noble fish will be accessible to fishermen again. In the Caspian, Russia and Kazakhstan are fighting hard to save the sturgeon and there is hope that the Caspian Sea will return to its former glory as the fishing centre for this part of Eurasia.

But let us return to travel. For the most part Kazakhstan is a country on dry land, but here and there water transport is used, specifically on the Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea and Lake Balkhash. There is also a well-developed network of riverways in the south-east, north-east and northern parts of Kazakhstan. In its time, in its rush for inexpensive electricity, the Soviet Union built huge hydroelectric plants, creating artificial lakes, which then became a favourite leisure and bathing destination for Kazakhstani.