

ASIA · MOUNTAINS · HIKING · ROAD TRIPS · OFF THE BEATEN PATH · DESERT



Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country, and most of it is steppe, but its south-east corner holds the snow-capped Tian Shan, the red-rock walls of Charyn Canyon and the alpine Kolsai Lakes, all within reach of Almaty. Add the Silk Road shrine at Turkistan, Astana's futuristic skyline and the chalk canyons of Mangystau.

 Before you go, read the UK government's travel advice for Kazakhstan and entry requirements (visas, passport validity). Last updated by FCDO 13 October 2026.

 CAPITAL Astana	 CURRENCY Kazakhstani tenge (KZT) £1 ≈ KZT 602	 LANGUAGE Kazakh, Russian	 BEST TIME May–Sep
 DAILY BUDGET £35–£170 ££ Moderate	 PLUGS Type C, F 220V · adapter needed	 FLIGHT FROM LONDON 7h 30m direct ~£450–£850 return	 TIME ZONE UTC+5 standard time

Kazakhstan stretches roughly 3,000 km from the Caspian Sea to the Altai, so trips are best built around one or two regions rather than a grand loop. Almaty is the natural starting point: a leafy former capital beneath the Trans-Ili Alatau, with ski slopes, high lakes and hiking trails less than an hour away, and Charyn, Kolsai and Kaindy a long day's drive east. Many travellers then fly to Astana for its showpiece architecture, or to Shymkent and Turkistan for Silk Road history. The far west, around Aktau and the Mangystau desert, makes a separate trip.

Costs are moderate: flights, trains and food are cheap by British standards, while good hotels in Almaty and Astana approach European prices. Russian is the everyday language in the big cities, English is patchy outside hotels and tour agencies, and a translation app helps. Hospitality is generous, especially in rural guesthouses where tea and bread arrive before you have sat down. Distances surprise people: Charyn and Kolsai need a car and an early start, and even the fastest train from Almaty to Astana takes most of a day or a night.

Top 5 highlights

- 1

NATURE

Charyn Canyon

About 200 km east of Almaty, the Valley of Castles section of this long canyon is a walk of a couple of kilometres between eroded red rock towers down to the Charyn River. Arrive early to beat the heat and tour groups.
- 2

NATURE

Kolsai and Kaindy lakes

Three spruce-ringed lakes step up a Tian Shan valley above the village of Saty, linked by a hiking trail. Nearby Kaindy Lake, formed by a 1911 earthquake landslide, has the bleached trunks of drowned trees rising from its turquoise water.

3

ADVENTURE

Medeu and Shymbulak

Just above Almaty, the high-altitude Medeu skating rink and Shymbulak ski resort are linked by cable car; in summer the lifts carry hikers towards the 3,000-metre-plus Talgar Pass. Big Almaty Lake, in a neighbouring valley, makes a separate trip.

4

SACRED SITE

Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi

Commissioned by Timur in 1389 and left unfinished, this UNESCO-listed shrine in Turkistan has a turquoise ribbed dome and a giant bronze cauldron. It honours a 12th-century Sufi poet and draws pilgrims year-round.

5

NATURE

Bozzhyra

A sweep of white chalk cliffs and fang-shaped pinnacles on the edge of the Ustyurt Plateau in Mangystau, around 300 km from Aktau. Reachable only by 4x4 with a driver, it is best seen on a camping trip at sunset and sunrise.

Biggest cities

LARGEST CITY

Almaty

≈ 2.4 million people

Kazakhstan's largest city and cultural capital: tree-lined avenues, the wooden Zenkov Cathedral, the Green Bazaar and a cable car up Kok-Tobe, with mountains rising straight behind.

2ND LARGEST CITY

Astana

≈ 1.6 million people

The planned capital, built up since 1997 on the open steppe, is a showcase of ambitious architecture, from the Bayterek tower to Norman Foster's tent-like Khan Shatyr; two days is plenty.

3RD LARGEST CITY

Shymkent

≈ 1.3 million people

A fast-growing southern city with busy bazaars and a warm climate, chiefly useful as the gateway to Turkistan and the ruined Silk Road cities of Sauran and Otrar.

Ranked by urban-area population where available. Figures are rounded estimates, and sources define city limits differently, so rankings of similar-sized cities can vary.

When to go to Kazakhstan

Best time: **May-Sep.**

Jan

Feb

Mar

Apr

May

Jun

Jul

Aug

Sep

Oct

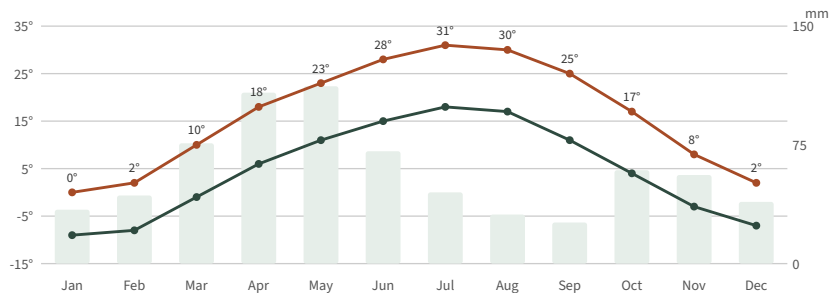
Nov

Dec

■ Best ■ Good ■ Mixed ■ Poor

Average climate in Almaty

— High °C — Low °C ■ Rain (mm)



Festivals & events

Mar	Nauryz The spring-equinox new year, celebrated from 21 to 23 March with yurts in city squares, horse games, concerts and bowls of nauryz kozhe, a seven-ingredient soup.
Jul	Capital Day, Astana On 6 July Astana celebrates its status as capital with concerts, fireworks and light shows along the Esil River embankments and around Bayterek.

How much does Kazakhstan cost?

SHOESTRING £35 per person / day ≈ KZT 21,079 hostels, street food, buses	MID-RANGE £80 per person / day ≈ KZT 48,181 3-star hotels, restaurants, some taxis	COMFORTABLE £170 per person / day ≈ KZT 102,385 4-star+, guided trips, private transfers
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Estimates per person per day, excluding flights. Prices vary by season and city.

Food to try

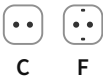
Beshbarmak The national dish: boiled horse meat or mutton served over broad sheets of noodle with an onion broth; the name means 'five fingers', as it was traditionally eaten by hand.	Boursak Puffy squares or rounds of fried dough served at every celebration and family table, alongside milky tea and fruit jams.	Kumis Fermented mare's milk, slightly fizzy, sour and mildly alcoholic, sold at roadside yurts and markets in summer.
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Getting around

Domestic flights on Air Astana, FlyArystan and SCAT are the fastest way to cover the distances and are often cheap. KTZ trains, including overnight sleepers, link the main cities and are comfortable if slow. Buses and shared taxis serve smaller towns. In cities, use Yandex Go or inDrive for taxis; Almaty also has a single metro line. For Charyn, Kolsai and Mangystau, hire a car and driver or join a tour.

Practical information

PLUGS & VOLTAGE



220V — bring a UK-to-C/F adapter

DIALLING CODE

+7

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Ambulance: **103**

Fire: **101**

Police: **102**

Emergency and rescue service: **112**

Source: FCDO “Getting help”

TIME ZONE

UTC+5 (standard time)

TAP WATER

Varies — bottled or filtered is safer

DRIVING

On the right

TIPPING

Many city restaurants add a 10–15% service charge, so check the bill before tipping. Otherwise round up, and tip guides and drivers on tours.

ETIQUETTE

Accept tea and food when offered, and never put bread on the ground or turn a loaf upside down. Remove your shoes in homes, and greet elders first.

MAIN AIRPORTS

Almaty International Airport (ALA), Almaty; Nursultan Nazarbayev International Airport (NQZ), Astana

Visas & entry for Kazakhstan

Shown for a British passport.

No visa needed

You can visit Kazakhstan without a visa for up to 30 days for business or tourism. You can make as many visa-free visits as you like, but you must not stay more than 90 days without a visa in any 180-day period.

To stay longer, to work or study or for other reasons, you must meet the Kazakh government's entry requirements. Check which type of visa or work permit you need with the Kazakh Embassy in the UK. Also see visa information from Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

From the UK government's FCDO entry requirements for British passport holders — read the full page for passport validity, permits and exceptions.

Health & vaccinations



See a travel health nurse, GP or travel clinic **6–8 weeks before you go**. Make sure routine UK vaccinations (such as MMR and diphtheria-tetanus-polio) are up to date.

RECOMMENDED FOR MOST TRAVELLERS

Tetanus

SOMETIMES ADVISED — DEPENDS ON YOUR TRIP, ACTIVITIES AND HEALTH

Hepatitis B

Measles

Rabies

Tick-borne encephalitis

Tuberculosis

Typhoid

YELLOW FEVER CERTIFICATE

A yellow fever certificate is only required if you arrive from (or transit through) a country with yellow fever risk — not if you fly direct from the UK.

MALARIA

No malaria risk

Source: TravelHealthPro (National Travel Health Network and Centre), checked 21 October 2026. This is a summary, not medical advice.

Public holidays in Kazakhstan

The next 12 months. Banks, offices and some sights may close, and transport and hotels get busy around these dates.

Sun 25 Oct 2026	Republic Day
Mon 26 Oct 2026	Republic Day (observed)
Wed 16 Dec 2026	Independence Day
Fri 1 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Sat 2 Jan 2027	New Year's Day
Mon 4 Jan 2027	New Year's Day (observed)
Thu 7 Jan 2027	Orthodox Christmas
Mon 8 Mar 2027	International Women's Day
Mon 15 Mar 2027	Constitution Day
Sun 21 Mar 2027	Nowruz Holiday
Mon 22 Mar 2027	Nowruz Holiday
Tue 23 Mar 2027	Nowruz Holiday
Wed 24 Mar 2027	Nowruz Holiday (observed)
Sat 1 May 2027	Kazakhstan's People Solidarity Holiday
Mon 3 May 2027	Kazakhstan's People Solidarity Holiday (observed)
Fri 7 May 2027	Defender of the Fatherland Day
Sun 9 May 2027	Victory Day
Mon 10 May 2027	Victory Day (observed)
Sun 16 May 2027	Eid al-Adha (date may shift)
Tue 6 Jul 2027	Capital Day

National holidays only. Dates based on lunar calendars can move by a day or two depending on official announcements.

Useful phrases in Russian

ENGLISH	RUSSIAN	SAY IT
Hello	Здравствуйте	<i>ZDRAST-vooy-tyeh</i>
Thank you	Спасибо	<i>spa-SEE-ba</i>
Please	Пожалуйста	<i>pa-ZHAL-sta</i>
Excuse me	Извините	<i>iz-vee-NEE-tyeh</i>
How much is this?	СКОЛЬКО ЭТО СТОИТ?	<i>SKOL-ka EH-ta STO-eet?</i>

Know before you go

Russian is the most useful language for getting around, but a few words of Kazakh — 'Sálemetsiz be' for hello and 'Rakhmet' for thank you — are warmly received.

Carry your passport at all times: hotels, train staff and police checkpoints ask for it, and some mountain areas near the Chinese and Kyrgyz borders need permits, which tour operators arrange.

Weather in the Tian Shan changes fast: even on a hot July day in Almaty, take a warm layer and a rain jacket for lakes and passes above 2,500 metres.

