

Almata:

The Apple Paradise

>Almata - Motaz Othman

On leaving the international airport, Almata city - whose name means "apple paradise" - astonishes the traveller with its gigantic apple trees strewn on both sides of its broad boulevards. You get the feeling that you are in a forest which is 150 years old. Previously, Almata was the capital of Kazakhstan; but in 1997, the capital was transferred to Astana in the centre of the country. Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country in the world in terms of area and the apple is its symbol.



The writer with a falcon الكاتب مع صقر أليف

I visited Almata, following an invitation from the organizers of the Kazakhstan International Travel Fair at the end of April 2007. It was my first visit to one of the republics of Central Asia. In fact, what I expected to see there was different from the reality of the city and the nature of its inhabitants.

Almata is a quiet city, peaceful, clean and very vast. It is rich in gigantic trees, parks and gardens to the extent that the footpaths are like parks with various types of trees. I never saw this in any other city. The streets are broad, and the traffic is very ordered. Most of the cars are modern mainly German made. Road maintenance is a constant activity.

Kazakhstan is regarded as the most developed republic of Central Asia. Its citizens profit from a comprehensive social security system: education and medical services are free.

Street signs are in Russian and Kazakh. The latter is close to the Turkish and Persian languages. There are few signs in English as Kazakhstan was part of the Soviet bloc. Russian is now the most used language. ▶



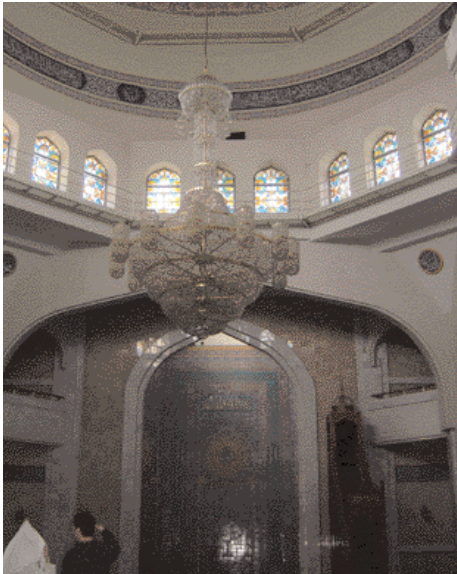
Friendly birds

طيور أليفة



The Unknown Soldier

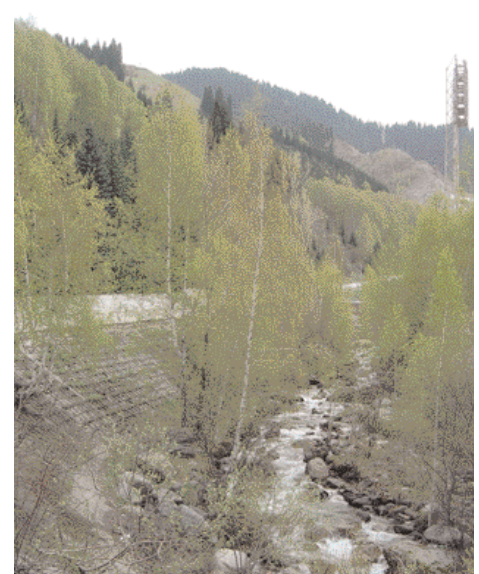
نصب الجندي المجهول



Juma'a Central Mosque مسجد الجمعة المركزي



Juma'a Central Mosque مسجد الجمعة المركزي



A small river نهر صغير

The weather in April is very beautiful with temperatures varying between 20 and 30° C. The rain comes in the form of a light drizzle sprinkling the trees and the vast streets. Sitting on the balcony of your hotel, with the view of the beautiful landscape, is like an excursion in the forest. Peace and tranquillity abound.

Transport is unique. There are no taxis but motorists will offer a lift if you indicate you are interested. They will ask where you are going and you have to agree on the price. Busses are cheap and frequent. I took one from the Astana International Hotel to the exhibition. To pay the fare put a coin in the machine and it will give the right change.

On the third day of my visit after the exhibition, I walked in the markets. Local goods are virtually non-existent with most of the items on sale from China or India. The Asian goods are reasonably priced while European imports are expensive. The market arcade with hundreds of shops, selling anything and everything, is the best place to shop. There is also the Chinese City.

There is no shortage of restaurants: Turkish, Iranian and Chinese. Horse meat is the favourite meat.

The tourist company Pegas invited me on a tour of the city and its surroundings. The first stop was the Central Juma'a Mosque, built by the current president Nursultan Abish-uly Nazarbayev. It is a large mosque, with modest decorations and refined Islamic artistic taste. Kazakhstan is a member state



Colourful square

ساحة مزدانة بالألوان

of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) with a Muslim majority.

We also visited the well-stocked Central National Museum with the quasi-complete skeleton of a dinosaur. I had to raise my head to see the bones of his knees. Kazakhstan was once dinosaur country.

Independence Square, the site of the Unknown Soldier and the Orthodox Church built from the wood of a rare blue tree, were also included in the tour. One can also visit museums of arts, and the zoos. Kazakhstan is a country full of wild life. According to Kazak traditions the new bride

must run in Independence Square the day before her wedding to prove to her husband that she is strong and capable of running the house.

In the mountains we were in a dense forest. There was also the opportunity to visit a ski resort. Kazakhstan, like the majority of ex-USSR countries is eager to promote sports and will host the Asian Winter Games in 2011. Cycling is one of the favourite sports followed by hunting which attracts Arab tourists.

Visitors to Kazakhstan will be enchanted by its beautiful nature, the kindness and cordial reception of its people and its rich culture. ■