

# Almaty: The Cosmopolitan Center of Kazakhstan

Almaty has perhaps one of the most striking and beautiful locations of any city in the world. Located in the spectacular foothills of the Zilishkiy Alatau Mountains, Almaty is a pleasant city to live in, vibrant, green, and with thriving cosmopolitan culture. The impressive mountains are only half an hour's drive from the city center. Almaty's population is 1.5 million.



The name Almaty comes from the Kazakh word 'alma', which means 'apple'. It used to be claimed that Almaty was home to the sweetest fruit in the world, and its former name, 'Alma-Ata,' means 'father of apples.'

One of the first reactions experienced by many foreigners arriving in the city is that it is the most 'European' in its architecture of all the Central Asian cities. 'Almaty' was the original name of a small Kazakh town, which was renamed 'Fort Vernyi' or 'Loyal Fort' by the Cossacks of the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the early twentieth century, the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan was established in the city, which was renamed Alma-Ata. Since then, the city has become the center of the economic, cultural, and political life in Kazakhstan.

In 1997 the capital was moved to Astana, which is located further to the North, in the geographical center of Kazakhstan. However, Almaty remains the 'Southern Capital,' and the financial and cultural center not just of Kazakhstan but of the whole Central Asian region.

Almaty is surrounded by the Alatau Mountains. Alatau means 'colorful' in Kazakh. The mountains

can be seen from every corner of the city making it common for the locals to use phrases 'to go up' or 'to go down' a road in their direct meaning.

Almaty's climate is continental: it is hot in summer and can get very cold in winter. The coldest months are January and February, when the average temperature drops to  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $9^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), and the hottest months are July and August, when the mercury averages around  $+27^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $80^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). The low rainfall is reflected by low humidity, which moderates both the heat of Almaty's summer and the cold of its winter.

Almaty is a haven for fans of the great outdoors. In the winter you can go figure skating at Medeu, the highest skating rink in the world, go skiing at one of several ski resorts within an hour's drive of the city, or go hiking or climbing in the mountains.



In summer you can go sailing, swimming, and sunbathing at Kapshagai, an artificially created lake in an hour distance from the city. Small boats can be rented for the day, as well as larger boats for longer excursions. You can go horseback riding at Almaty's hippodrome or in one of the valleys in the mountains outside the city.

Almaty is well-equipped with sports centers and gyms offering a wide range of facilities including classes in yoga, pilates and martial arts.

For lovers of culture, Almaty has several permanent theaters including the Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre, the State Drama Theater, and several others that offer daily performances in different languages. There are a number of cinemas that show movies in English as well as a range of art galleries, museums and even permanent circus. As well as a great number of restaurants offering both local and international cuisine, the city is home to a large and constantly evolving

catalog of cafes, bars, bowling alleys and nightclubs.

## Landmarks

### The Republic Square

Almaty's main square is the largest and the most picturesque in the city, with its magnificent ensemble of modern architecture. To the south-east there is the President's Southern Residence, the former government building (now the Akimat, or City Hall) and the national television centre. The Central State Museum is situated east of the square, and the Regent Ankara Hotel is on the western side.

In the center of the square stands the 18-meter-high monument of Independence designed by Shota Valikhanov, a well-known Kazakh architect. President Nazarbayev had the idea for the monument while on a diplomatic visit to Egypt. The obelisk is topped with the figure of a Sacaе warrior with a winged snow leopard in flight, and flanked by metal panels depicting key events in Kazakhstan's history. A plaque at the foot of the obelisk bears the palm-print the President made on the Constitution when he was sworn in.



### Svyato-Voznesenski Orthodox Cathedral

The cathedral (also called the Zenkov Cathedral) is located in the 28 Panfilov's Guardsmen Park. It was designed by a local architect A.P. Zenkov and was built in 1904 of wood, entirely without nails. Its wall paintings and screens were painted by local artist Nicholai Chludov while the interior decorations were made in art workshops in Moscow and Kiev. Its height is about 50 meters. The building strikes one's imagination with its beauty and splendor. It is one of the eight most unique wooden buildings in the world. Of special interest is the fact that it survived the 1911 earthquake with a magnitude of 10 on the Richter scale. Used as a museum of local lore, history, and economy during the Soviet period, in May 1995 the Cathedral has been returned to the Russian Orthodox Church and restored. Since 1997, Orthodox services have been carried out there.

## The Central (Green) Bazaar

The Central Market, otherwise known as the Green Bazaar, brings to life the finest traditions of the Asian bazaar. Here you can experience the true taste of the East. This is not just a market, but a meeting-place of various Asian cultures in miniature. You can sample the wealth of produce grown throughout Central Asia as many of the farmers have come from neighboring countries. In the bazaar's open courtyard there are numerous shashlyk stands, a flea market, flower stalls and a restaurant serving local dishes. The fruit and vegetables at the Green Bazaar are of extremely good value in summer.

## Arasan Baths

Almaty's central bath-house is situated in a large, impressive dome-shaped building opposite the Panfilov Park. Three types of bath are available at Arasan: Russian, Finnish and Turkish. The Russian and Finnish baths share the same plunge pool and you can try both on one ticket. The Finnish bath is dry while the Russian version is a sea of steam. The Turkish bath consists of stone platforms heated to three different temperatures and a plunge pool. Various kinds of massage are on offer.

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