PACK LIGHTLY

THE NINTH-LARGEST COUNTRY ON EARTH

Kazakhstan

Mountains and canyons an hour from Almaty, a sci-fi capital on the steppe, and the distances you fly instead of drive.



p. 23 The route picker: find your trip in one look

p. 30 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

p. 11 Four wonders within a day trip of Almaty

45 PAGES USD PRICES VISA-FREE 30 DAYS EDITION 2026.07

photo: Wikimedia Commons

Start here

the shape of a Kazakhstan trip, what it costs, what to sort first


CHARYN CANYON, NEAR ALMATY

Kazakhstan is enormous, the size of Western Europe with a fraction of the people, so the first thing to accept is that you pick a corner rather than see it all. Almaty and its wall of Tian Shan mountains is the easy, rewarding base: canyons, alpine lakes and ski slopes all sit within a day trip. Astana is the futuristic capital out on the steppe, and the far west and east are separate trips you reach by plane. This guide helps you choose the corner, then cross the distances without wasting days.

The shape of a trip

Base in Almaty for the mountains and canyons, add the capital Astana by a short flight, and treat Mangystau, the Altai or Baikonur as separate fly-in add-ons.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 30 USD a day, mid-range around 65, captured for this edition. The full receipt, bed to supper, is itemised on page 30.

Sort before you fly

Most passports enter visa-free for 30 days, so check yours. Add travel insurance, an eSIM, and book domestic flights early; the distances are real. Page 32 lists the order.


DINNER, THE NATIONAL DISH


THE CAPITAL, ASTANA

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

Contents

tap a line to jump straight there

01 The country 06

02 Where to go 09

03 What to do 16

04 Routes and itineraries 22

05 When to go 27

06 Practical 31

07 Safe and smart 36

08 Tools, print cards, sources 40

QUICK JUMPS

The route picker 23

What a day really costs 30

Four wonders near Almaty 11

Your trip on one page

10-14 days · 30 to 150 USD/day · best May-Jun and Sep

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. Base in Almaty for the mountains, add the capital and one far region by air. The country is too big to drive end to end, so the plan is a hub with flights, not a single loop. Book from the bars below, not from resort rates, and lock domestic flights early.

THE ROUTE

Almaty day 1-6 — 1h40 flight — **Astana** day 7-8 — flight — **Turkestan** day 9-10 — 3h flight — **Mangystau** day 11-14

BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker	30 USD
Standard	65 USD
Comfort	150 USD

BOOK FIRST

01	International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out	Aviasales
02	Domestic flights, the distances are real	Aviasales
03	eSIM, install before departure	Saily

BEST MONTHS

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec

best: mild and clear · shoulder: hot steppe or cool edges · hard winter cold

Kazakhstan is nearly cashless. A card works almost everywhere; the local Kaspi QR runs the corner shops. Carry a little tenge for bazaars and rural stops.

Distances are the whole planning problem. A flight from Almaty to the Caspian is three hours; the drive is three days. Fly the long legs.

Kazakhstan at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Nature	80
Friendliness	75
Safety	70
Budget friendly	70
Active vacation	70
Culture	65

Budget travel	30 USD/day
Mid-range	65 USD/day
Luxury	150 USD/day

MOUNTAINS · NATURE · STEPPE · ADVENTURE · NOMAD

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-07

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP













01

The country

What Kazakhstan is, why its scale changes how you travel, and the three regions you need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

What Kazakhstan is 07

A country the size of a continent 08

What Kazakhstan is

20M people · 3 regions · the ninth-largest country

A vast, oil-rich republic of 20 million people, the size of Western Europe and the largest landlocked country on earth. Almaty, the leafy former capital under the mountains, is where most trips start; Astana, the purpose-built capital on the northern steppe, is the government showpiece. Kazakhstan is more modern and more cashless than its neighbours: cards work almost everywhere, the cities feel European, and the wild lies just outside them. It is Muslim-majority and Russian-speaking, secular and easygoing, and it opened up with visa-free entry that makes it the smoothest of the stans to visit. What you come for is space: mountains, canyons, deserts and steppe on a scale that resets your sense of distance.

CAPITAL
Astana
Almaty is the largest city

POPULATION
20M
Muslim-majority, secular

CURRENCY
KZT
1 USD = ~500 tenge

BEST MONTHS
May-Jun
and September

THREE REGIONS, THREE CHARACTERS



Almaty and the Tian Shan

mountains · canyons · the easy base

Where the trip lives. A green city against a wall of peaks, with canyons, alpine lakes and ski slopes all inside a day trip.



Astana and the steppe north

futuristic capital · grassland · Burabay

The showpiece capital of glass towers on open steppe, with the lakes and rock domes of Burabay a few hours north.



The far edges: Mangystau, Altai, the south

Caspian deserts · Altai peaks · Turkestan

Separate fly-in trips: the otherworldly chalk deserts of the Caspian west, the alpine Altai east, and the holy city of Turkestan in the south.

A country the size of a continent

why the scale shapes every plan

The single fact that shapes a Kazakhstan trip is size. It is the ninth-largest country in the world and the biggest with no coast, stretching from the Caspian Sea almost to Mongolia. That scale is the appeal and the constraint: the landscapes are continental in variety, but you cannot join them on the ground in a normal holiday. The nomadic heritage runs deep here, from the golden eagle hunters to the yurt and the horse, and it makes sense once you see the distances the herders crossed. The practical takeaway is simple. Pick one or two regions, fly between them, and let each corner be its own trip rather than a checklist.

AREA	WEST TO EAST	ALMATY TO AKTAU	THE HERITAGE
2.7M km2	**~3,000 km**	**3h fly**	**Nomad**
ninth-largest on earth	Caspian to the Altai	3 days by road	horse, yurt, eagle



Two low-cost carriers, FlyArystan and SCAT, plus Air Astana, connect the regional hubs daily. Book a few weeks out and internal flights are cheap.



First trip? Give Almaty and its mountains a full week and add just the capital. The far regions reward a second visit more than a rushed first.

GO DEEPER

The top picks in best places, the wild side in national parks, and the culture in the culture page.

02

Where to go

The mountain city and its wonders, the steppe capital, and the far regions worth a flight. What each is worth, and which is a second-trip idea.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Almaty	10
Four wonders near Almaty	11
Astana	12
Turkestan and the south	13
Mangystau and the Caspian	14
The Altai, Burabay and Baikonur	15

Almaty

the mountain city · 2-3 nights · your base for the peaks



The country's largest city and its most likeable: leafy avenues, good coffee and a wall of snow peaks rising straight out of the southern suburbs. Almaty rewards a couple of slow days between mountain trips. Ride the cable car up Kok-Tobe for the view, wander the wooden Ascension Cathedral in Panfilov Park, and eat your way through the Green Bazaar. In winter it is a genuine ski city, with the Medeu rink and Shymbulak slopes twenty minutes from downtown. Mostly, though, it is the base you sleep in and stock up in between the wonders on the next page.

WORTH THE CITY DAYS

- [ ] **Kok-Tobe.** Cable car up for the mountain-and-city view.
- [ ] **Ascension Cathedral.** The tall wooden church in Panfilov Park.
- [ ] **Green Bazaar.** Horse meat, dried fruit, and lunch.
- [ ] **Medeu and Shymbulak.** Skating rink and ski slopes above town.

→ Use Yandex Go for taxis; it is cheap and honest. The metro is one clean line, handy for the center.

↗ Base near Panfilov Park or Kok-Tobe side for easy access to both the center and the mountain roads out of town.

MORE ON THE SITE

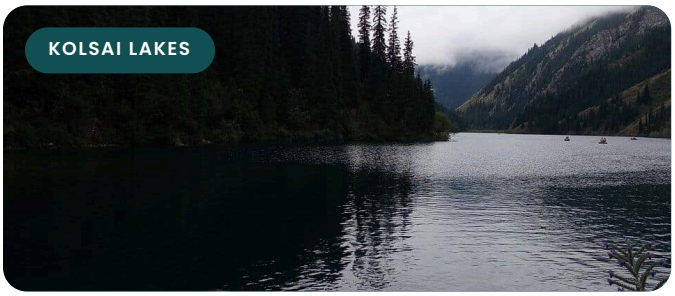
Neighbourhoods and logistics in the Almaty guide.

Four wonders near Almaty

day trips and overnights · the reason to base here



This is why you base in Almaty. Within a few hours sit some of the country's headline landscapes. Charyn Canyon, the Valley of Castles, is a red-rock gorge often called a smaller Grand Canyon and doable in a long day. The Kolsai Lakes and the drowned forest of Lake Kaindy make a two-day loop into the Tian Shan. Big Almaty Lake is a turquoise reservoir under the peaks, close enough for an afternoon. Further out, the Singing Dune of Altyn-Emel hums in the wind. A driver or a small-group tour covers each without the logistics headache.





Charyn is a long day; leave Almaty by 7am. Kolsai and Kaindy are better as an overnight in a homestay than a punishing day return.

Big Almaty Lake sits in a protected zone near the border; bring your passport and do not swim, it is drinking water.

MORE ON THE SITE

The gorge in Charyn Canyon, the reservoir in Big Almaty Lake, and more in national parks.

photos: Wikimedia Commons

Astana

the built-from-scratch capital · 1-2 nights



Kazakhstan moved its capital to the empty northern steppe in 1997 and built a city of glass towers and grand axes from nothing. Astana is a short, strange, worthwhile stop: a showcase of Norman Foster architecture and national ambition that feels like a film set. Climb the Bayterek tower for the view down the ceremonial boulevard, see the tent-shaped Khan Shatyr mall and the giant Nur-Astana mosque, and feel the raw wind that never stops on the steppe. One full day covers the sights; it is cold and exposed for half the year, so time it for late spring or summer.

WORTH THE DAY

- [ ] **Bayterek.** The landmark tower and the boulevard view.
- [ ] **Khan Shatyr.** The giant leaning-tent mall by Foster.
- [ ] **Nur-Astana Mosque.** One of Central Asia's largest.
- [ ] **Nurzhol Boulevard.** The ceremonial spine, walk it at dusk.

Astana is compact at the core but the monuments are spread along one axis. Yandex between them, or rent a bike in summer.

Two hours by road north lies Burabay, the lake-and-granite park that Kazakhs call their little Switzerland. Add a night if you have it.

MORE ON THE SITE

The capital in the Astana guide and the park in Burabay.

Turkestan and the south

the holy city · 1-2 nights · a Silk Road detour



The south is where Kazakhstan touches the classic Silk Road. Turkestan holds the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, a huge, unfinished Timurid dome that is the country's holiest site and its finest single monument, now framed by a slick new tourist complex. It pairs with Shymkent, the busy southern city and transport hub, and sits within reach of the Uzbek border if you are combining the two countries. It is a short flight or an overnight train from Almaty. Give the mausoleum a slow morning; the light on the tilework is best early.

Turkestan is the natural land border with Uzbekistan. Many travelers pair it with Samarkand and Bukhara on one Central Asia trip.

Dress modestly at the mausoleum; it is an active pilgrimage site, not just a monument.

MORE ON THE SITE

The southern highlights in best places and the wider country in the culture page.

Mangystau and the Caspian

the otherworldly west · 3-4 days · a 4x4 expedition



Out on the Caspian, the Mangystau region is the country's most surreal landscape and its most adventurous trip. Chalk pinnacles rise from a dry seabed at Bozjyra, perfectly round stone spheres litter the Valley of Balls at Torysh, and underground mosques hide in the cliffs. There is little infrastructure, so this is a guided 4x4 expedition from the port city of Aktau, three or four days of camping and driving between the formations. It is a fly-in trip, not a day out, and the payoff is scenery that looks like another planet. Go with a reputable operator; the desert is unforgiving.

Fly into Aktau and book a Mangystau tour in advance. Self-driving the tracks without local knowledge is a real risk.

Spring and autumn only. Summer on the Caspian desert is brutal, and there is no shade out among the formations.

MORE ON THE SITE

The port in Aktau, the shore in the Caspian coast, and more in off the beaten path.

The Altai, Burabay and Baikonur

three more corners for a second trip



Three more corners for travelers with time. The Altai in the far east is Kazakhstan's alpine heart, all lakes, larch forest and quiet trails near the Russian and Mongolian borders. Burabay, north of Astana, is the accessible weekend version: granite domes and pine-fringed lakes. And Baikonur, the Russian-leased cosmodrome out on the southern steppe, is where crewed spaceflight began and still launches; a tour lets you watch a rocket go up, though it takes booking through an agency months ahead and a permit. All three are separate journeys rather than add-ons to the mountain trip.

☆

Baikonur is not a walk-up. Launch-viewing tours are arranged months ahead through licensed operators, with permits and set dates.

∩

Short on time and want green? Burabay is the easy pick: a few hours from Astana, lakes and rocks for a relaxed weekend.

MORE ON THE SITE

The cosmodrome in Baikonur, the park in Burabay, and the eastern lake in Alakol.

03

What to do

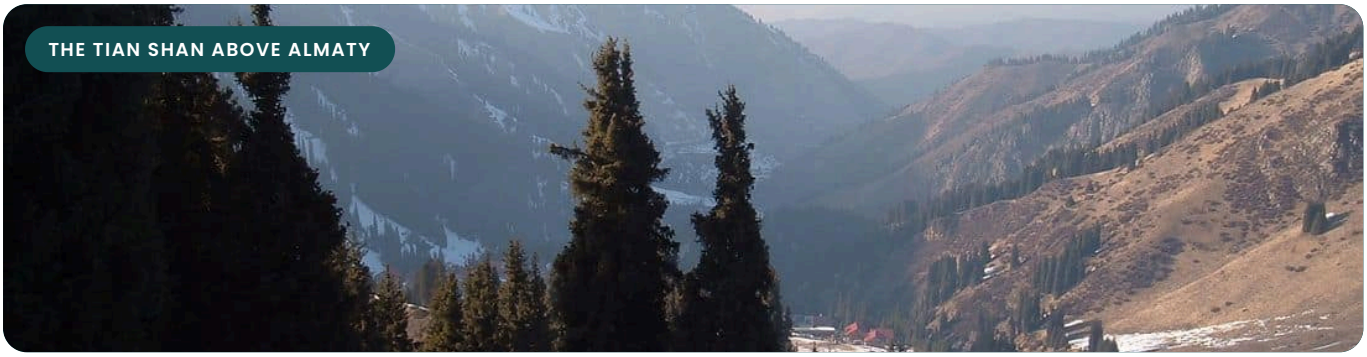
The outdoors that draw most people here, the nomad culture that still runs under the surface, what to eat, and where to sleep.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The outdoors	17
Nomad heritage	18
Food spotlight	19
Where to stay: Almaty, Astana	20
Where to stay: Turkestan, Aktau	21

The outdoors

mountains, canyons, lakes and snow · the main event


THE TIAN SHAN ABOVE ALMATY

Nature is the reason most people come, and it runs the full range. Hiking is the headline: day walks to the Kolsai lakes, the Butakovka waterfall above Almaty, and multi-day treks in the Tian Shan. Winter turns Almaty into a ski city at Shymbulak, with the historic Medeu speed-skating rink below. Beyond the mountains lie the desert formations of Mangystau, the singing dunes of Altyn-Emel and the granite lakes of Burabay. You do not need to be an expert; most of the best of it is reachable on a day tour or a guided overnight with a driver.

PICK YOUR OUTDOORS

- [ ] **Day hikes.** Kolsai, Butakovka, the Big Almaty Peak trails.
- [ ] **Canyons.** Charyn's Valley of Castles, a long day out.
- [ ] **Skiing.** Shymbulak, December to March, twenty minutes from town.
- [ ] **Desert and dunes.** Altyn-Emel's Singing Dune, Mangystau's chalk.

Mountain weather turns fast even in summer. Carry a warm layer and a rain shell for any day trip above town.

Some parks and border-zone lakes need a permit or a passport check. A local tour handles the paperwork for you.

GO DEEPER

The ranges in mountains and the protected areas in national parks.

Nomad heritage

horse, yurt and eagle · the culture under the modern surface



Under the glass towers and the ski lifts, Kazakhstan is a nomad culture two generations from the saddle, and it shows once you leave the cities. The golden eagle hunters of the east still fly trained birds to take fox and hare in winter. The horse is everything: transport, sport and, as kumis and kazy, dinner. Games like kokpar, a rough polo played with a goat carcass, still draw village crowds, and the dombra, a two-string lute, is the national sound. You can meet a little of this at a staged eagle demonstration or, better, on a homestay out in the mountains where the yurt is not for show.





A mountain homestay beats a staged show for meeting the real thing. Tour operators in Almaty can set one up in the Kolsai valleys.

Nauryz, the spring new year in late March, is the best time to catch traditional games, music and food all at once.

GO DEEPER

Traditions and etiquette in the culture page.

Food spotlight

a meat-and-milk table, and what it costs

Kazakh food is nomad food: meat, dough and dairy, built for the steppe. Beshbarmak, boiled meat over wide noodles eaten by hand, is the national dish and a shared-plate event. Horse is normal and good, as kazy sausage or in the beshbarmak broth. Wash it down with kumis, fermented mare's milk, if you are brave. Below is what you will actually eat, with typical restaurant prices.

DISH	WHAT IT IS	PRICE
Beshbarmak	Boiled meat over flat noodles, the national dish	USD 8-18
Kazy	Horse-meat sausage, a delicacy	USD 3-8
Plov	Rice pilaf with meat and carrot	USD 3-8
Lagman	Hand-pulled noodles in broth	USD 3-7
Shashlik	Charcoal-grilled meat skewers	USD 2-4
Samsa and tea	Tandoor pastry and a pot of tea	USD 1-2

prices from the local-food-and-drinks dataset, captured 2026-06



BESHBARMAK, EATEN BY HAND



THE GREEN BAZAAR, ALMATY

See the full dish list with photos, regional variants and prices in the free food tool on pack-lightly.com.

Open What to Eat and Drink

Where to stay: Almaty and Astana

prices per night, double room · central and walkable

Both cities are modern and easy. In Almaty, base in the center between Panfilov Park and the Arbat for cafes and quick access to the mountain roads. In Astana, stay near the Nurzhol boulevard to walk the monuments. Book a night or two ahead; supply is good outside major events, and cards are accepted everywhere.

Almaty

hostel 10 USD mid 40 USD comfort 120 USD

Central near Panfilov Park puts cafes, the bazaar and taxis to the mountains on your doorstep. Check what a central room costs, or the hostel scene through Hostelworld.

Astana

hostel 12 USD mid 45 USD comfort 130 USD

Base near Nurzhol boulevard to walk the sights. See what the center is charging; budget beds run through Hostelworld.

Day tours to Charyn, Kolsai and Big Almaty Lake sell out in summer; book the mountain trips ahead.

See guided tours in Almaty

Where to stay: Turkestan and Aktau

prices per night, double room · the south and the west

Two very different bases. Turkestan is a small pilgrimage town where new hotels have sprung up around the mausoleum complex; a night is plenty. Aktau is the Caspian port and the launch point for any Mangystau expedition, so most people sleep there before and after the desert. Book Aktau ahead when a tour is arranged; the town fills around expedition departures.

Turkestan

guesthouse 8 USD mid 30 USD comfort 80 USD

New hotels ring the mausoleum complex, walkable to the monument at dawn. Check rooms near the complex, or budget beds on Hostelworld.

Aktau (Mangystau)

hostel 12 USD mid 40 USD comfort 110 USD

The Caspian port and base for the desert. See what Aktau is charging before and after your Mangystau tour; hostels list on Hostelworld.

Mid-range and up across the country, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

04

Routes and itineraries

Eight ready-made trips by who you are and how long you have, a two-week plan built around Almaty, and the real map of the distances.

IN THIS CHAPTER

The route picker 23

Two weeks, days 1–7 24

Two weeks, days 8–14 25

The route on a map 26

The route picker

find the closest trip to yours, then adjust

Eight trips by traveler, length and budget. Totals are per person unless noted, on-the-ground costs excluding international flights, using this edition's prices.

SOLO · 7D · BACKPACKER

Almaty and the mountains

USD 400 · hostels + shared tours

- Almaty 3
- Charyn day trip
- Kolsai overnight 2

SOLO · 10D · MID

Mountains plus the capital

USD 900 · adds an Astana flight

- Almaty 4 · canyons + lakes
- Fly Astana 2
- Back to fly home

COUPLE · 10D · MID

The classic pair

USD 1,900 for 2 · hotels + a driver

- Almaty 4 · private day tours
- Kolsai overnight
- Astana 2

NATURE · 12D · MID

Canyons, lakes and dunes

USD 1,300 · Almaty base

- Charyn + Kolsai + Kaindy
- Big Almaty Lake
- Altyn-Emel Singing Dune

ADVENTURE · 14D · MID

Add the Mangystau desert

USD 1,900 · 4x4 expedition

- Almaty + mountains 7
- Fly Aktau
- Mangystau 4x4 4

FAMILY · 10D · MID

Lakes and the capital

USD 3,200 · family of 4

- Almaty 4: cable car, zoo
- Fly Astana 2
- Burabay lakes 2

GRAND TOUR · 21D · MID

Four corners by air

USD 2,600 · the big loop

- Almaty + mountains
- Turkestan + Astana
- Mangystau to finish

SPACE · 12D · COMFORT

Steppe and a rocket launch

USD 2,400 · Baikonur permit

- Astana 3
- Baikonur launch tour
- Almaty + mountains

Two weeks around Almaty

days 1-7 · the city and the Tian Shan

The first week is the mountains, run from an Almaty base. Book Charyn and the Kolsai overnight through a local operator; the roads and permits are easier handed off. Keep a rest day in town between big drives.

1	**Arrive Almaty** ALA · day zero	Land, SIM and cash, taxi to a central hotel. Evening walk on the Arbat, first plate of manti.
2	**Almaty city** Kok-Tobe + bazaar	Cable car up Kok-Tobe, Panfilov Park and the wooden cathedral, lunch at the Green Bazaar. Book tours.
3	**Charyn Canyon** long day trip	Early start east to the Valley of Castles, walk the gorge floor, back to Almaty for the night.
4	**To the Kolsai lakes** mountain homestay	Drive into the Tian Shan, hike the first Kolsai lake, overnight in a village homestay.
5	**Lake Kaindy** the sunken forest	The drowned spruce forest of Kaindy in the morning, then the long drive back to Almaty.
6	**Big Almaty Lake** half day + rest	Turquoise reservoir under the peaks in the morning, an easy afternoon and cafes back in town.
7	**Fly to Astana** 1h40 flight	Midday flight north to the capital. Evening walk down the lit Nurzhol boulevard.

Two weeks around Almaty

days 8-14 · the capital and the Caspian desert

The second week is the big pivot: the futuristic capital, then a flight west to the surreal Mangystau desert. Swap Mangystau for Turkestan and Burabay if you would rather stay closer and skip the expedition.

8	**Astana** the built capital	Bayterek tower, Khan Shatyr, the grand mosque. A day is enough for the monuments and the strangeness.
9	**Fly to Aktau** Caspian coast	Fly west to the port city. Meet your Mangystau operator, provision, sleep before the desert.
10	**Into Mangystau** 4x4, day one	The Valley of Balls at Torysh and the underground mosques, camp out on the steppe.
11	**Bozjyra** the chalk pinnacles	The Bozjyra tract at dawn, the country's most surreal view, then more formations across the dry seabed.
12	**Back to Aktau** coast + rest	Out of the desert, a shower and the Caspian shore. Last seafood dinner in town.
13	**Fly to Almaty** last city day	Back east. Souvenirs at the bazaar, a last mountain view from Kok-Tobe.
14	**Depart** fly home	A slow morning, last coffee, evening flight out of Almaty.

The route on a map

a hub in Almaty, flights to the far corners

There is no single loop in a country this size. The plan is a hub in Almaty with day trips to the mountains, and flights out to the capital, the south and the Caspian. The map shows why: the far corners are flights, not drives.



WHAT THE LEGS COST AND TAKE

LEG	MODE	TIME	FARE
Almaty to Charyn Canyon	Road, day trip	3h each way	tour USD 30-60
Almaty to Astana	Domestic flight	1h40	USD 40-90
Almaty to Turkestan	Flight or night train	1h30 / 12h	USD 40-80
Almaty to Aktau	Domestic flight	3h	USD 70-130

fares captured 2026-06; book domestic flights on Air Astana, FlyArystan or SCAT

05

When to go

The windows worth targeting in a country of hard winters and hot steppe summers, the festivals to time, and what a day really costs.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price 28

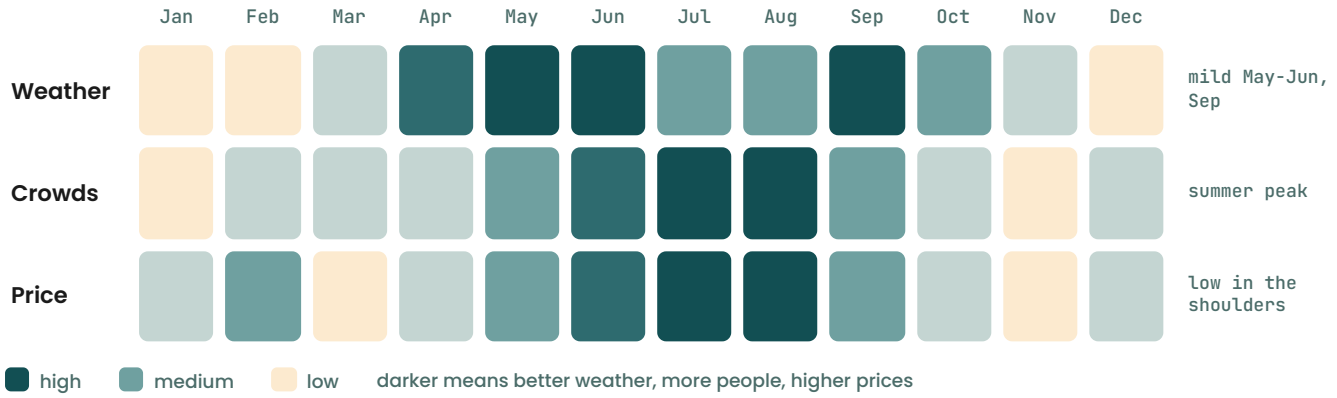
Festivals worth timing 29

What a day costs 30

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · a hard continental climate

Kazakhstan swings hard between seasons. Winters are long and bitter, especially on the steppe around Astana, where it drops well below freezing for months. Summers are hot and dry on the plains and deserts but pleasant up in the Tian Shan. The sweet spots are late spring, May and June, when the mountains green up and wildflowers cover the hills, and September, when the heat breaks and the light turns golden. Skiers get their own window from December to March around Almaty.



source: best-travel-time dataset and country-comparison, captured 2026-06

The mountains and the steppe run different clocks. July is punishing on the plains but perfect for high Tian Shan trekking.

Nauryz, the spring new year around 21 to 22 March, is the biggest celebration and a fine, if still cold, time to feel the culture.

Festivals worth timing

the dates that change what you see



Most of the year is fine to visit, but a few dates transform a city or fill the hotels. Nauryz is the one to plan around; the summer capital and city days bring parades and closures worth knowing about.

THE CALENDAR

- [ ] **Nauryz, 21 to 22 March.** The spring new year: yurts, games, music and food across every city. The biggest days of the year.
- [ ] **Almaty Marathon, April.** The city's big running day; central roads close.
- [ ] **Astana Day, 6 July.** The capital's birthday, concerts and fireworks, hotels fill.
- [ ] **Eagle-hunting festivals, winter.** In the east, hunters gather to fly their birds; dates vary by village.
- [ ] **Independence Day, 16 December.** National holiday, closures, deep winter cold.

GO DEEPER

Dates and closures in the public holidays page and the month-by-month picture in best travel time.

What a day costs

three travel styles · printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the drink at the end. Three real versions of the same day in Kazakhstan. Guided mountain trips sit on top of these.

A DAY IN KAZAKHSTAN

* backpacker *

hostel bed	10.00
bakery breakfast	3.00
cafe lunch	5.00
canteen dinner	6.00
Yandex + bus	2.50
museum or entry	2.00
water + snacks	1.50
TOTAL / DAY	**~30 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-06

A DAY IN KAZAKHSTAN

* standard *

3-star double, half	22.00
cafe breakfast	4.00
restaurant lunch	7.00
dinner with drinks	12.00
Yandex rides	5.00
day activity or tour, split	10.00
coffee and extras	5.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~65 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-06

A DAY IN KAZAKHSTAN

* comfort *

4-star double, half	70.00
hotel breakfast	incl.
restaurant lunch	12.00
dinner, good table	22.00
private driver, half day	30.00
guide or activity	12.00
drinks and extras	4.00
TOTAL / DAY	**~150 USD**

country-comparison data · 2026-06

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

06

Practical

Visa, money, flights, eSIM, health, packing. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Book in this order 32

Money and transport 33

Bed, bag, signal 34

Health basics 35

Book in this order

four things before you fly · the rest on the ground

Kazakhstan is a smooth country to organise, and only a few things reward planning ahead. Hotels, drivers and city tours are easy to sort once you arrive. The one thing that genuinely repays booking early is the internal flights, because the distances are large and the cheap seats go first.

8 wk before

International flights

Most routes connect through Istanbul, the Gulf or Frankfurt into Almaty or Astana, with some direct from Europe. Fares soften six to eight weeks out.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk before

Insurance + visa check

Buy travel insurance with medical evacuation, useful for the mountains and remote Mangystau. Then confirm entry: most nationalities enter visa-free for 30 days. Keep your passport valid well beyond your stay.

Check entry rules per passport

3 wk before

Domestic flights

Book the internal legs to Astana, the Caspian or the south early. Air Astana, FlyArystan and SCAT connect the hubs daily, and the cheap fares sell first.

Compare domestic flights on Aviasales

1 wk before

eSIM

Install before departure, activate on arrival. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps, ride apps and uploads across the cities.

Set up a Saily eSIM

Mangystau and Baikonur are the two trips that must be booked well ahead through operators. Everything else can wait.

A card covers almost everything here, but bring one anyway as backup and a little cash for rural stops.

Money and transport

a cashless country · flights for distance, trains for the view

Kazakhstan is one of the most cashless countries you will visit. The local Kaspi app and card run daily life, and foreign cards work almost everywhere, even at market stalls. Carry a little tenge for rural stops and tips, but you will rarely need it. For distance, fly: the internal network is cheap and frequent. Trains, the comfortable Talgo services, are the scenic budget option for shorter hops, and Yandex Go is the honest taxi in every city.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Bed, hostel to 4-star	USD 10	USD 40	USD 120
Meal out	USD 4	USD 10	USD 25
Yandex across town	USD 2	USD 4	USD 8
Domestic flight	USD 40	USD 70	USD 130
Day tour to the mountains	USD 30	USD 60	USD 120

verified 2026-06 · per-category detail in the budget guide

GETTING AROUND: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Flights for the big distances, full stop; the Almaty to Aktau drive is three days against a three-hour flight. Talgo trains are comfortable and cheap for Almaty to Turkestan or Astana if you have the time and want the steppe scenery. Inside cities, Yandex Go replaced the taxi haggle, and Almaty has a clean single metro line. For the mountains, a hired driver or a small-group tour beats piecing together marshrutka minibuses. Compare rail and bus options through 12Go.

THE FULL PICTURE

Cash and card detail in the currency rundown, the full cost model in budget saving, and air legs in domestic flights.

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and up, Booking.com has the deepest inventory and free-cancellation options across the cities. For hostels and social stays in Almaty and Astana, Hostelworld has the better review pool. In the mountains, a village homestay near the Kolsai lakes beats any hotel for the experience.

BAG: THE LAYERED LIST

- [ ] Real layers: hot days, cold nights, mountain wind
- [ ] A warm jacket even in summer for the high lakes
- [ ] Sturdy walking shoes or light boots for trails
- [ ] Sun hat, sunglasses, SPF 50; the light is strong
- [ ] Rain shell for fast-changing mountain weather
- [ ] Refillable water bottle and electrolyte sachets
- [ ] Type C/F plug adapter, 220V
- [ ] A power bank for long flights and drives
- [ ] One card for daily life, a second as backup
- [ ] Passport copy for border-zone lakes and permits

Signal. Install an eSIM before you fly and activate on arrival. A 10 to 15 GB plan covers two weeks. Local Beeline or Kcell SIMs are cheaper for longer stays; bring your passport to register.

Set up a Saily eSIM

06

GO DEEPER The full season-by-season list in the packing list, what to wear in clothes, and plans compared in the eSIM write-up.

Health basics

six weeks out · most of this list is reassurance

Kazakhstan is a low-drama health destination. There is no malaria, pharmacies are common in cities, and the main risks come from the outdoors: altitude in the mountains, sun and heat on the steppe, and cold at height. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order.

THE SHORT LIST

- [ ] **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, flu) are current.
- [ ] **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for a food-and-travel trip. Hep A is a two-shot series; start early.
- [ ] **Forest trips:** ask about tick-borne encephalitis if you plan long spring or summer hikes in the Altai woods.
- [ ] **Altitude:** the Tian Shan lakes sit high; go up gradually and drink plenty of water.
- [ ] **Water:** drink bottled or filtered; city tap water is not reliable for visitors.
- [ ] **Insurance:** medical cover with evacuation, essential for the remote mountains and Mangystau.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Almaty and Astana have the best private clinics; the regional cities cover the basics and serious cases are flown to the big two. Pharmacies (apteka) handle stomach upsets, minor infections and altitude headaches over the counter. Dial 103 for an ambulance and 112 for the unified emergency line; hotel reception is the fastest route to an English-speaking doctor.

READ ON The shot-by-shot schedule in the vaccinations breakdown, clinics in the hospitals page, and cover compared in the travel insurance rundown.

07

Safe and smart

Why entry is easy, the few things worth watching, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the language minimum that changes how people respond.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Staying smart 37

Etiquette: do and do not 38

Language and emergencies 39

Staying smart

easy entry, and the few things to watch

Kazakhstan is a safe, easy country for travelers, and the old Soviet-style registration hassle is mostly gone: enter visa-free, get your stamp, and if you stay under 30 days there is usually nothing more to file, since hotels register you automatically. The things actually worth attention are ordinary: taxis, long roads, and a couple of border-zone rules.

WATCH 01

The unmetered taxi

Flagging a random car or taking an airport tout means a tourist price several times the going rate.

The fix: use Yandex Go for a fixed, honest fare. It works in every city and at the airports.

WATCH 02

Long-road driving

The real risk here is the road: huge distances, tired drivers, wildlife at dusk, and rough surfaces between towns.

The fix: fly the long legs, use trained drivers for mountain trips, and avoid night driving on rural roads.

WATCH 03

Border-zone surprises

Some lakes and areas near the China and Kyrgyz borders, like Big Almaty Lake, sit in restricted zones.

The fix: carry your passport on day trips and let a local tour handle any permit; they know the current rules.

BONUS

Document checks

Police checks of foreigners are now rare, but carrying ID is expected.

The fix: keep a passport photo or copy on your phone and the original safe. Genuine officers do not ask for cash.

07

MORE ON THE SITE

The full safety and entry picture in the safety breakdown and the rules in the visa page.

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing · the rest smooth the day

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense if you ignore them; the rest simply make you a welcome guest. Kazakh hospitality is generous, rooted in the nomad code of looking after the traveler.

DO

Accept the tea and the food

Refusing a host's spread reads as cold. Take a little, even if you are full.

DO NOT

Waste bread or step on it

Bread is respected. Keep it right-side up on the table and never throw it away.

DO

Remove shoes in homes

And in yurts. There are usually slippers at the door; follow your host.

DO NOT

Photograph people without asking

Especially elders and at the Turkestan mausoleum. A gesture and a smile usually gets a yes.

DO

Dress modestly at holy sites

Cover shoulders and knees at the mausoleum and mosques; women, keep a scarf handy.

DO NOT

Feel forced to match the toasts

Hospitality can involve vodka. Declining politely, citing health or driving, is fine.

DO

Try a few words of Kazakh or Russian

Rakhmet and spasibo both land well. Russian is understood everywhere.

DO NOT

Wade into politics or history

Relations with neighbours can be sensitive. Listen more than you opine.

Offer a seat and respect to elders first; age carries real status here, especially at the table.

A raised voice loses the room. Patience and a smile solve most snags across the region.

MORE ON THE SITE

Customs and hospitality in the culture page and what to wear in clothes.

Language and emergencies

a handful of words · the numbers to keep

Kazakh is the state language and Russian is the everyday lingua franca of the cities; both are useful and either is welcomed. English is common among younger people and in hotels, less so on the street and in the regions.

THE TEN WORDS THAT HELP

ENGLISH	KAZAKH	RUSSIAN
Hello	Salemetsiz be	Zdravstvuyte
Thank you	Rakhmet	Spasibo
Yes / No	Ia / Zhoq	Da / Nyet
How much?	Qansha?	Skolko?
Water	Su	Voda
Delicious	Damdi	Vkusno
Sorry	Keshiriniz	Izvinite
Where is…?	…qaida?	Gde…?

POLICE	AMBULANCE	FIRE	UNIFIED
102	103	101	112

GO DEEPER

More phrases and script notes in the language page.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you 41

Print cards: cut, fold, take 42

Sources and methodology 43

A note on the links 45

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Kazakhstan data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Kazakhstan: 30 USD/day backpacker, 150 USD/day comfort.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/



Country Map

The Tian Shan to the Caspian desert, mapped.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/



Best Time to Travel

Best: May-June and September. Month by month.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/



What to Eat and Drink

Beshbarmak, kazy and more, with prices.

pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale · credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

KAZAKH AND RUSSIAN · ESSENTIALS

Hello	Salemetsiz be / Zdravstvuyte
Thank you	Rakhmet / Spasibo
Yes / No	Ia, Zhoq / Da, Nyet
How much?	Qansha? / Skolko?
Water	Su / Voda
Delicious	Damdi / Vkusno
Where is...?	...qaida? / Gde?
Sorry	Keshiriniz / Izvinite

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EMERGENCY · KAZAKHSTAN

Police	102
Ambulance	103
Fire	101
Unified	112
Currency	KZT (tenge)

My hotel: _____

Address: _____

Insurance #: _____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Kazakhstan hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition.

pack-lightly.com/kazakhstan/

Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is at the hotel.

Save the Kaspi and Yandex Go apps too. Between them they cover payments and taxis across the whole country.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

Wouter van Kemenade

Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, data-led travel writing with a performance-marketing background. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hotel and hostel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-06, Almaty, Astana, Turkestan and Aktau centers.
2. Currency rates: ECB and open reference rates, 2026-06.
3. Visa policy: Kazakhstan government guidance (gov.kz), retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Daily-cost model: Pack Lightly country-comparison dataset, captured 2026-06.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last checked 2026-06.
6. Climate and seasons: best-travel-time dataset and 10-year averages, captured 2026-06.
7. Pack Lightly Kazakhstan cluster pages, retrieved 2026-07: visa · budget · safety · best travel time · eSIM

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 5, re-scored on a regular cycle. Budget figures come from the country-comparison and budget-calculator datasets, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.07: first release of the Kazakhstan guide on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: January 2027. Not covered in depth here: winter ski logistics, deep Altai trekking, and Baikonur launch bookings, which are specialist trips of their own.

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Image credits

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4. **Bayterek Tower**. Wikipedia, CC BY 2.0.
5. **Beshbarmak dish, boiled meat and flat**. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 2.0.
6. **Big Almaty Lake, turquoise water**. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.
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15. **Kolsai Lakes, forested alpine lake**. Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.
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Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured July 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

disclosure · why this guide is free

This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A hotel area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated sight is still called overrated, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales** · **Booking.com** · **12Go** · **Saily** · **Hostelworld** · **Stay22** · **GetYourGuide** · via **Travelpayouts**

Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/kazakhstan.

This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands January 2027 and replaces this file at the same download.