

EDITOR'S WELCOME

IT WAS A GREAT MOMENT for me to see the first issue of *WLT Kids* (January–April 2005) arrive at my office. I'll be pleased if you, the readers, found it as interesting as I hoped you would. You will see some changes in this issue. There is a box at the beginning for you to write what you know about the country we are highlighting in the issue. We are also putting some of the activities for you to do right next to the literature. You may see some other changes as well. I hope that you will interact with what you see and let me know how you like it. This issue highlights Kazakhstan, a large country in Central Asia. The far eastern part of the country edges into Europe and the far western border touches China. It has a rich history and culture and a people who are gracious and welcoming. Enjoy your visit with my friends there as you read the introduction, poems, and story.

Sara Ann Beach

**INTRODUCING
 Kazakhstan
 and Its People**

IT IS ALWAYS CHALLENGING to write about one's motherland, because on the one hand you want to be exact in describing it, while on the

other you want the readers to learn about the best things in your country. Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world and is about the size of western Europe. To the north and west is the Russian Federation; to the south is Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan; and to the east is China. Along part of the western border is the Caspian Sea. Some people abroad associate Kazakhstan with wide, endless steppes or grasslands, much like the North American prairie. However, Kazakhstan also has regions with mountains and lakes, deserts and forests. The mountains are mostly in the east and southeast. The steppes are in the north and central part of the country, and fade to the deserts in the south. The winters in the north are very cold and summers are mild. In the southern part, however, the winter is very mild, with little or no snow, and summers are extremely hot. The country is divided into fourteen regions, called *oblasts*. Each *oblast* is named after its regional capital. The national bird is the golden eagle, which is represented on the Kazakh flag. The country is rich in oil but also has other natural resources, including a wide variety of plants and animals. In the desert areas, herds of camels roam. These camels are mostly two-humped camels that are reddish brown, although occasionally there are also white camels and camels with only one hump. In the forests there are bear, elk, foxes, wolves, deer, sables, ermine, and falcons.



Young dancer in a traditional performance at Panfilov Park, Almaty

Photo: © 2004 by Wayne Eastep



Photos: Sara Ann Beach

Kazakhstan was established as the Kazakh Khanate in the fifteenth century (*khans* are local chieftains in the countries of central Asia). It included



three main independent parties called *Juzy* (or “hundreds” in English), borrowed from the Mongolian

Khanate. The parties became the Young Juze, the Mid Juze, and the Senior Juze. Unofficially, this division is still strongly followed among ethnic Kazakhs. In the nineteenth century, the Kazakh lands became part of the Russian Empire. In 1917–18, during the Russian Revolution, Soviet power was established in the whole territory of Kazakhstan and it became one of the republics,



A Kazakh language student at Arkhimed High School

part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). For over seventy years, Kazakhstan remained one of the republics of the USSR. In October 1990 the USSR collapsed and the government of Kazakhstan adopted a Declaration of State Sovereignty. Kazakhstan became the Republic of Kazakhstan, an independent country with a presidential form of government. It is on the way to building a democratic society with a strong market economy.

While ethnic Kazakhs make up the majority of the people in the country, people from many other ethnic groups and beliefs live in Kazakhstan. These groups include Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Koreans, Germans, Uighurs, among others. These different ethnic groups have left their mark on Kazakh architecture and especially on the kind of foods one would find at a celebration dinner. The Kazakh national dish, made of lamb or mutton, noodles, and onions, is called *bashbarmak*, or “five fingers,” because traditionally it is eaten with your hand. Other popular foods are Uzbek *plov*, a dish made of fried rice and meat; Russian *pelmeny*, a meat pie; and Uighur *manty*, a dumpling filled with ground meat, onion, and pumpkin.

What I know about Kazakhstan



A traditional container for kumiss, an alcoholic drink made from fermented mare’s milk



Little Camel magazine, written by and for children and published by the Kazakh Reading Association

Before the Soviet era, ethnic Kazakhs were a nomadic people who moved from pasture to pasture with their sheep, cows, and horses. Many of the ancient traditions and cultural activities continue. One tradition is for different tribes to come together to compete in horse racing, Kazakh wrestling, and singing songs. In the old days, everyone learned to ride a horse and play the *dombra*. The *dombra*, the national instrument, is a two-stringed instrument with a long neck and a short round body. Children and adults play it to accompany songs about the realities of life. These songs were and still are widely composed by both poets and ordinary people. In ancient times, the folk poets were famous among the different tribes because they could tell the people and the khan (the tribal ruler in those days) their point of view concerning what was happening in the tribe. They were



Fun Facts about Kazakhstan

- **Cosmonauts take off into space from the Baykonur Cosmodrome**
- **Oral (Uralsk) is in both Europe and Asia**
- **Taraz (formerly Zhambyl) is on one of the old silk roads from China to Europe**
- **Apples grown in the Almaty region can grow as large as 1 kilogram (approximately 2.2 pounds)**
- **The literacy rate in Kazakhstan is approximately 99 percent**
- **Kazakh, the official language, has been written in three different alphabets: Arabic, Roman, and Cyrillic**

the only ones who could openly criticize the khan's policies by singing about wars or taxes, for example. They also honored heroes of wars or talented people. Today, there are competitions among professionals and ordinary people to compose verses. This tradition may explain why today Kazakhstani children can so easily write poetry and songs and why most of them can sing and play musical instruments. Children today also enjoy soccer, wrestling, and gymnastics. Children in the countryside also play a traditional game call *assyk*, which means sheep bone. In this game, each person has a different colored assyk so he can easily recognize his own. A line is drawn in the ice or dirt, and each player tries to throw his many assyks behind the line. The winner is the person who throws the most assyks behind the line; as a prize, he or she wins the assyks of all the other players.

The national language of Kazakhstan is Kazakh. Kazakh uses the Cyrillic alphabet like the Russian language. During the Soviet era, Russian was the main language of the country and still remains popular today, especially in the larger cities. Consequently, there are both schools in which Russian is the main language and schools in which Kazakh is.

The biggest city in the country is the former capital, Almaty. Almaty is located in southeastern Kazakhstan and remains the largest financial, economic, and cultural center of Central Asia. The capital of Kazakhstan today is Astana. Its name translated from Kazakh means "capital." Another important place in Kazakhstan is the Commodore Baikonor in the Kyzlorda *oblast*. From here, the Soviet and Russian cosmonauts were launched into space.

*Sapargul Mirseitova, President
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Questions to Ponder

How is the way of life in Kazakhstan different from your way of life? How is it the same? What else would you like to know about living in that part of the world?

Kazakhstan was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) from 1917 to 1991. They became part of the USSR after the Russian Revolution. In 1776 the thirteen American colonies became independent from Great Britain after the Revolutionary War. How were the two revolutions similar? How were they different? How was the USSR similar to and different from the United States?

If you were able to visit Kazakhstan, which part would you like to visit? Why? What might you do while you were there? What might you see?