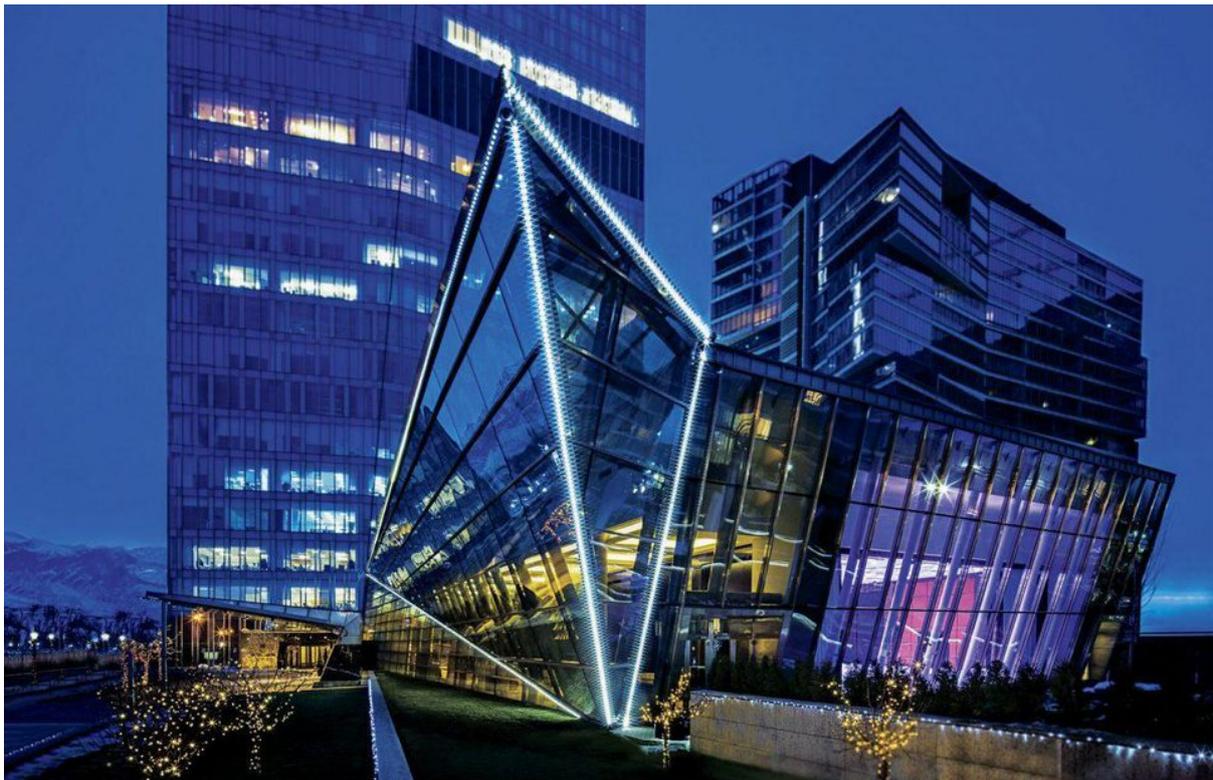


Almaty: An Emerging Destination For Global Travelers And A Center Of Culture For Locals

By Stephan Rabimov

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“Fake it till you make it - is so 20th century!” A friend’s joke resonated with my feelings about our current moment in time. We live in the age of authenticity. This applies to relationships, businesses, and yes... travel. Social media further drives the value of the experience itself. A new breed of traveler has emerged in search of cities no one can locate on a map, unfamiliar cuisines and the latest *next* thing to be shared online with eager followers. The social and economic stakes are high, and many locations struggle to rise to this challenge. As unconventional travelers have been quietly flocking to Almaty in Kazakhstan, I decided to also investigate what is so exciting about the former Kazakhstan capital.



The Ritz-Carlton in Almaty

Forget Borat, the fictitious, mustachioed, mankini-wearing media personality played by Sacha Baron Cohen in the eponymous cult film. Kazakhstan is [anything but that stereotype](#). It is the most economically advanced of the ‘-stan’ nations in the region. Thanks to its rich oil and mineral reserves, it’s enjoying a steady annual [3.5% GDP growth](#). Almaty is

the largest city in the country. It is located at the foothills of the snow-capped Trans-Ili Alatau Mountains. Within 20 minutes you can get from almost any of the downtown hotels, restaurants or clubs into the picturesque natural reserves just outside of the city's center.



Medeu in the Summer months

Real fun starts at 5500 feet above sea level! [MEDEU](#), the largest high-altitude outdoor skating rink in the world, is the starting point for various hiking trails reachable by designated cable car soaring above the valleys and streams towards the [Shymbulak Ski](#) resort. Another hour-long hike takes you to the spectacular Budakovsky waterfall. After you've had your share of Zen, get down to brunch on the terrace of [S.N.e G](#), a charming, rustic hotel with fantastic views.



Medeu - ski resort on the outskirts of Almaty

Back in the urban environment, discover why Almaty is famous for the large beautiful parks in nearly every neighborhood. [Panfilov Park](#) is a perfect place to soak up the city's history. On one hand, it's home to the Eternal Flame Monument, an impressive classic example of Soviet-style post-war propagandist architecture. At the same time, you can visit the Cathedral of the Holy Ascension, an all-wooden confection with painted tiles and gilded domes that rise almost 200 feet! Astonishingly, it was built without a single nail. Afterwards, refuel at [Coffedelia](#), a sleek cafe with Parisian-style patisseries, delicious eggs benedict and free fast wi-fi to upload your adventures onto Instagram! In the evening swing by the popular [Barmaglot Bar](#) to hear playlists from world-class DJ's and sample craft cocktails with unusual ingredients like cuttlefish ink and indigenous Central Asian spices.



Barmaglot

To find out why Almaty is fast becoming a new foodie destination of Central Asia, head out to [AFISHA](#). This lovely restaurant strikes a balance between Old World and Contemporary in a manner that brings to mind the Copenhagen or Budapest culinary scenes. Upon entering visitors are greeted by a striking Gauguin-esque mural, antique ceiling moldings and blonde hardwood floors. Bartender Oksana Zhidkova, renowned for her wizard-like use of secret ingredients, developed seventeen exclusive cocktails for Afisha. The kitchen uses only local produce and prepares many dishes in a wood burning oven. For starters, try the roasted vegetable ‘caviar’ spread served with homemade cheese, savory butter and grilled rustic bread. The wild mushrooms with Japanese greens miso dressing and truffle aioli is a popular main course. And no one should leave without trying at least one slice of their honey cake!



Afisha restaurant in Almaty

After a good night of rest, follow the lush, tree-lined streets the Zelenyi (Green) Bazar, the city's ultimate food temple. This centrally located market has been working continuously for almost 150 years, including during a complete renovation by the Soviet architects. Among the must-try delicacies are the Sturgeon caviar from the Caspian Sea, camel milk, and hand-picked herbal teas from the nearby mountains. Just outside the market is the [Rakhat Candy Factory](#) which has been making its famous sweets for more than 70 years. It is by far the most delicious gift to take home for all the curious loved ones! Pamper yourself at the [Arasan Spa](#) which is also just a short walk from the market. Here you can choose from among different types of baths and soaks all in one place for under \$10! At the end of the day take a five-minute cable car ride to [Kok-Tobe Hill](#) for the most amazing sunset at the foot of the iconic TV tower.



Arasan Spa

A visit to Almaty is not complete without a day trip outside city limits. A mere three hours away, the rough beauty of the mountains will make you feel as if you've stepped back in time for millennia. At Altyn Emel, [a UNESCO's World Heritage site](#), you can meditate in the shade of its famous weeping willow tree that is more than 700 years old. It has withstood the Mongol invasions, the Russian Empire and the fall of the Soviet regime! Its story gives you a real life-changing perspective. For another once in a lifetime experience check out the [Singing Dunes](#) in the Aktau Mountains. This natural phenomenon occurs when the Western winds makes sand particles electrified by the sun create a unique sonic vibration. You simply cannot forget these otherworldly songs of the dunes.



Singing Dunes

Almaty and Kazakhstan offer a getaway for travelers seeking authentic experiences to wow both themselves and their social media followers. [#Almaty](#) features about 5 million posts compared to 60+ million impressions for regional travel magnets like Dubai or Istanbul. If you like to be among the global pioneers celebrating off the beaten path places, welcome to Almaty.