



The Karashash Ana Mausoleum in Sayram

In Kazakhstan's deep south

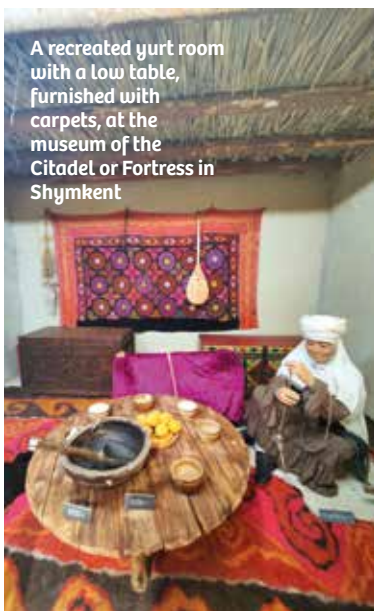
EXPLORING THE SILK ROUTE CITY

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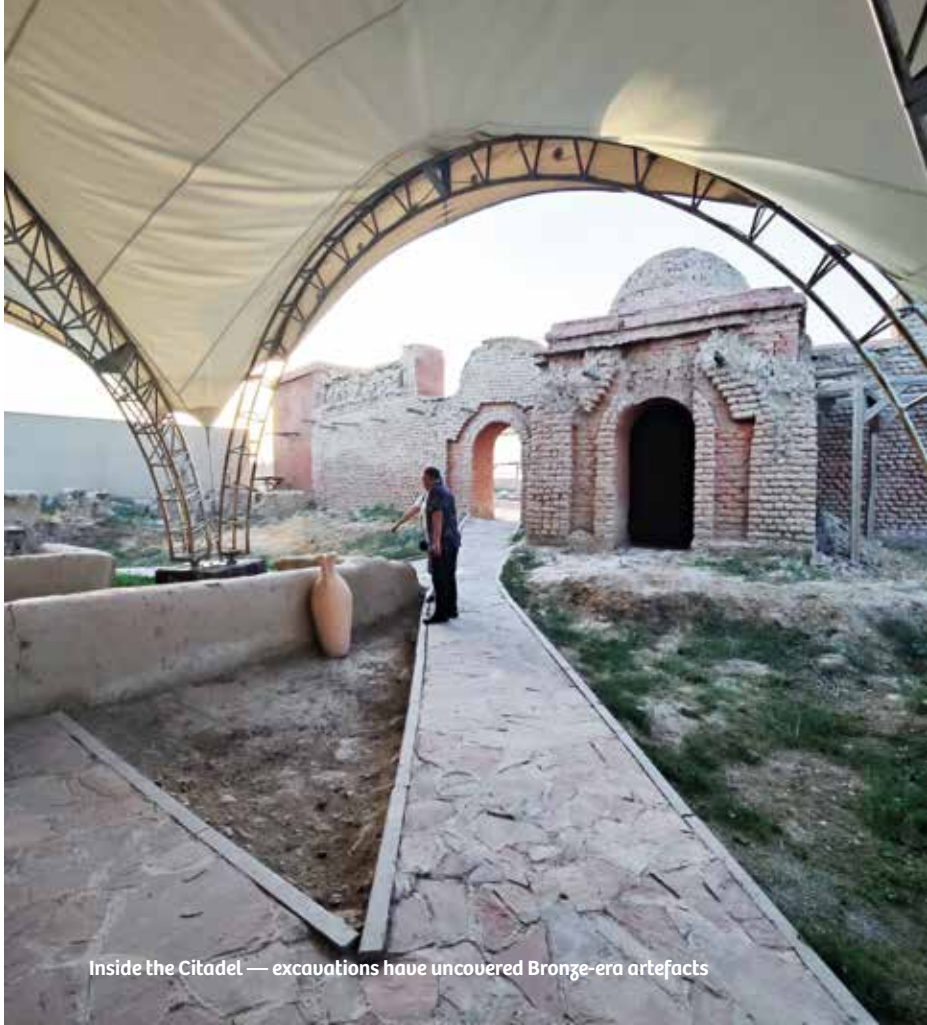
I am in a tranquil oasis in the centre of a bustling city – with more than 600 species of plants and towering trees, from linden and spruce to magnolia, pine and birch, with a green lake with ducks and geese, boating, biking paths and walking trails. It's a favourite among locals, especially newly wedded couples for photoshoots. Mothers with babies, students with their laptops and couples, sit on benches under trees or picnic on carpets on the lawns with slices of watermelon, cheese and bread. Dendro Park is just one of the eight parks of Shymkent in South Kazakhstan – an arboretum that sprawls over 120 acres and was built in 1979, on the site of an old waste dump.

Just 100 km from the Uzbek capital Tashkent, Shymkent, in Southern Kazakhstan, the nation's third largest city, which literally translates to 'green city', is filled with parks and tree-lined boulevards. It is situated on the edge of the Kazakh desert, and was once a prosperous town on the famous Silk Route from China to Europe. Shymkent started off as a caravanserai to protect the ancient town Sayram, 10 miles away. It was destroyed and rebuilt several times in its tumultuous history by Genghis Khan and other invaders. The Khan of Kokand transformed Shymkent to an important fortress but in 1864, it was conquered and destroyed by the Russians, and Shymkent became part of the Russian Empire.

The first place I head to as soon as I land in the city, and want to get some fresh air



A recreated yurt room with a low table, furnished with carpets, at the museum of the Citadel or Fortress in Shymkent



Inside the Citadel — excavations have uncovered Bronze-era artefacts



Shymkent's popular Tulip fountain. Tulips went from Central Asia to other parts of the world

is the massive Abay Park, Shymkent's own Central Park named after a local poet and philosopher, with locals walking, socialising and families with babies in prams enjoying the wide open space and fresh air, having ice creams and boiled corn. With walking trails, fountains and lush gardens as well as play areas for kids, this is a great way to get acquainted with the city. I notice

that many parts of the city have a European ambience with outdoor cafes and restaurants and tree-lined avenues. Everywhere I see Kazakh families with apple-cheeked kids, picnicking in parks and splashing in the water of fountains.

History whispers from every corner of this Silk Route city. I visit the Museum of Victims of Political repression to get a

glimpse into the city's painful history and its struggle for independence. This one-room museum with a centrepiece statue that portrays men, women and children struggling to free themselves, is a powerful testament to the spirit of the Kazakh people. The museum documents the various labour camps and Stalin's totalitarian regime that impacted the lives of locals adversely. There are photographs, artefacts and personal belongings of those who experienced repression. More than 1 million Kazakh people left the country, a famine caused the death of more than 3 million people and the wives of repressed public figures were put in a prison camp. Many Kazakh people, who were nomadic, were forced to start a settled life. Many innocent people were sent to hard labour camps and lived in horrible living conditions; many others were executed by firing squads.

Shymkent was also one of the most important cities in Kazakhstan during World War II when as many as 17 factories produced spare parts for tanks and shells. Many locals lost their lives fighting in the Soviet army. The Alley of Glory has plaques commemorating their services. At the Independence Park, I see an eternal flame burning, and a monument with 137 pillars that represent the number of nationalities in the country.

The showstopper of Shymkent is the Citadel or the fortress on a hill top in the centre of Old Town, which has been excavated in stages since 2007, to show continuous occupation for more than 2,200 years, with Bronze age artefacts being unearthed. The reconstructed fortress with its citadel walls was opened in 2021 to the public. Our local guide explains that it became an important outpost to protect the old silk road city from enemies from the steppe. The fortress lost its importance during the Russian Empire when Shymkent's new city centre was built some kilometres away. Today, this archaeological open-air museum with excavated mounds under tents, showing dwelling units, artificial irrigation and an onsite museum that showcases pottery, ceramics, ornate saddles, candlelight holders and water jugs, is time travel. I love the yurt (the dwelling of nomads) showing traditional costumes, and carpets as well as traditions of the Kazakh nomads.

To get a bird's eye view of the city, I drive



Local boursak and katama bread



Traditional Tohax bread



Shymkent has a great cafe culture

up to the Baidibek statue with an observation desk. The 75-foot statue with arms outstretched to the sky, is of the famous Baidibek Bi, who united the nomadic tribes and raised them to protect their native land from enemy invasions. In contrast to the rest of the modern city, on Kazybek Bi Street are old Soviet-style buildings that lived through the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Across the Koshkar-Ata canal are some remaining streets of pre-Russian Shymkent, lined with old wooden houses.

To get a taste of local culture, I visit the Samal market, where aisles of fresh fruits and vegetables, dried fruits, spices, local salted and smoked cheeses, and huge discs of crusty bread and kumis (fermented horse's milk) are on sale. Local horse meat is the Kazakh delicacy and thanks to a big Korean population, Korean noodles and ingredients is a common sight. Though most Kazakhs drink black tea, there are cafes that serve international blends of coffee alongside cakes and sandwiches. On the menus of local restaurants are a variety of dishes that show the cultural diversity of the nation – from the signature Beshbarmak horse meat dish to Uzbek pilaf, kebabs, Uyghur Lagman noodles, Kazakh breads like boursak and Turkish mezze.

I visit the ancient city of Sayram with mosques and excavations of the old Silk Route city that existed here. This was



The reconstructed citadel with its defensive walls

where a famous Sufi saint Khoja Ahmed Yasawi was born. Mud houses line the streets that have no sight of Soviet-style blocks or modern houses. At the local museum, I see pottery from excavations, prayer carpets, old samovars and traditional robes of the Kazakh people as well as a reconstructed yurt that was the shelter for nomadic people in the past, usually made from birch or willow and lined with felt.

I drive out of the city through vast stretches of empty steppes and then towards the surrounding mountains to visit the 500-metre deep Aksu canyon. The Aksu river turns the colour of milk in the summer months, which is the reason for its name – in Kazakh, Ak is white and su is water. Off-roading with Dos-

jaan, my driver, through bumpy roads, I reach a remote section of the canyon that is rugged and deserted. To see the cyan blue glacial waters of the Aksu river cut its way through the rocks to form a deep gorge for as long as 15 kilometres is an ethereal sight. The Nature Reserve fringed with the Western Tien Shan mountains, with alpine meadows, has ibex, brown bears and golden eagles, forested with birch, juniper and poplar trees. You can spend days here camping and exploring the park on horseback or jeep rides. Every spring from late April to early June, the park is ablaze with wild tulips. I put it on my wish list for next time. **W**

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