

Travel

I arrived in Aktau by boat, sharing the 24-hour Caspian Sea crossing from Azerbaijan with a truck driver named Yirkin, who was hauling electrical machinery from Poland to China. He'd been driving for seven days and had at least another six ahead of him before reaching Ürümqi.

Wedge between our bunks, we talked about our homes — his city of Aktau, capital of Kazakhstan's Mangystau region, my Canadian prairie. He asked about drivers' salaries in Canada. I gave him a fair assessment. After a moment's nodding thought, he went to his bunk, curled up facing the bulkhead, and remained that way for most of the journey.

Canada, it seemed, was in the air. Dmitry, owner of the Mr Ponchik (Mr Doughnut) coffeeshop, where I went almost every morning the two weeks I was in Aktau, had tried to relocate there as a young man. "Beautiful," he said, "But hard, very hard to get in." And one evening, I dined with a woman who had studied in Vancouver, and later made a career out of advising Aktau youth on going abroad. "Of course," she said, "when they go away, they expect a fancy, expensive car is waiting for them."

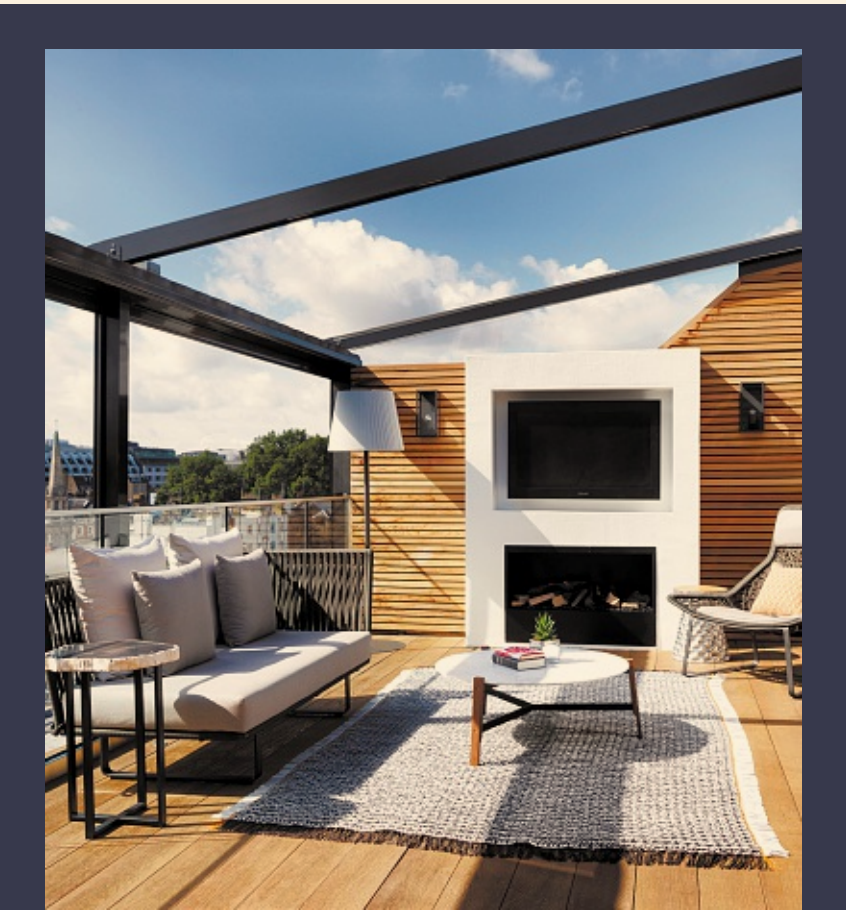
There were plenty of expensive cars in Aktau, however — shiny BMWs, Audis and Range Rovers. Thanks to the oil and gas industry, Mangystau has some of the country's highest salaries. "But everyone is living on credit," someone told me.

Still, when it came to my company, not even debt could deter anyone from practising *konakasy*, the Kazakh tradition of offering guests an abundance of generosity. It is a big-hearted culture, and needs only the barest introduction to offer a meal, a drink, a gift. Even when I tried to pay for a taxi ride, the driver batted away my *tege* banknotes.

Youthful dreams of a peripatetic life might be expected. Kazakhstan has always been a nation of nomads (this past week the capital Astana played host to the World Nomad Games, a sort of Olympics alternative with traditional sports involving archery, riding, falconry and wrestling). It's only in the past 60 years that people have lived in Aktau with any sense of permanence. For the nomadic herdsman of the past, Mangystau was a seasonal retreat, suitable only in cooler months — the name means "wintering place of a thousand tribes". In summer, the blistering heat would be catastrophic for sheep.

Beginning in the 19th century, the Russians used this Caspian shore as a penal colony, Kazakhstan being Russia's equivalent of Australia — distant, arid, suitable for undesirables and troublemakers. The Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko was one such prisoner, and there is a museum dedicated to him in the dusty town bearing his name, Fort Shevchenko, some 90 miles north of Aktau; an afternoon visit was enough to convince me of its suitability for exiles.

And like Australia, western Kazakhstan held unanticipated potential in its vast reserves of uranium, oil and natural gas. After these discoveries in the mid-20th century, Aktau was built in such a hurry that there wasn't time for a centre to form. The result is a suburb in search of a city, each disparately geometric micro-district offering up street after street of high-rise breeze-block



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Kazakhstan's wild west



Central Asia | The lunar landscapes of Mangystau are opening up to tourism.

JR Patterson joins a group of sightseeing locals for a madcap ride into the desert



From main: walking on a rocky ridge at Bozzyhyra; the entrance to the holy shrine of Beket-Ata, built into the rock of a mesa

Alexandr Dubynin/Getty Images; JR Patterson

brutalism, punctuated by wide, empty squares and gleaming shopping malls.

The latest resource to be tapped is tourism. There is, in Aktau, the year-round skating rink (inside a shopping mall), the replica Arc du Triomphe that sits against the desert and the Caspian promenade, lined with hotdog and kebab vendors. But better are the natural wonders of greater Mangystau, which rival the greatest on Earth: the expanse of the Ustyurt desert, monolithic inselbergs, tiramisu-hued mesas and enough underground mosques to visit one every day for a year and not see them all.

To reach these sites — most of them located hundreds of miles inland from the Caspian, there are various local tour companies offering one- or multi-day trips into the desert. Some of them seem affected by the strange Soviet-style approach, wherein strictness is gilded with a certain screwball madness. A private jeep can run to up to £400 per person per day, while single-day van trips are only around £25, including lunch.

One day, with seven other sightseeing Kazakhs, I took a van trip to visit the canyon of Bozzyhyra. I sat wedged between Nurman, an engineer from Almaty, and Zhanara, an administrator from Astana. Nurman thumped his broad chest. "Kazakh nation good; Kazakh strong; Kazakh noble." These were statements, but also appeals to agree with him — which I did.

There were also three university students from Aktau, each of them har-

bouring dreams of going to Canada. One had a friend who'd studied in Ottawa. "Oh Canada," he said. "It is my dream."

Soon we were cresting a plateau, and had a view over the flat basin we'd just crossed: a world of desolation, dominated by salt pans. Within Aktau, a heavy distribution of security cameras means that drivers are relatively sedate and cautious. Beyond city limits, however, things were different.

The flat, gold-on-green expanse that made up the vast steppe seemed to shake something loose that the city suppressed. We were moving at considerable speed, the van swaying as we switched lanes to overtake slower cars, buffeted by the *whump* of other vehicles going the opposite direction. None of the other passengers seemed fazed by this. If anything, they looked bored.

En route to Bozzyhyra, we made a brief stop at the holy shrine of Beket-Ata. "This is the Mecca for Kazakh Muslims," Zhanara said. The mosque, built into the rock of a mesa, was fortified by a casket of cement. The interior walls were whitewashed and smooth, the ground covered in balding sheepskins and carpets. In a small antechamber, an imam sat beside the tomb of Beket-Ata. With women to one side, men to the other, he spoke his prayer, his voice hoarse with repetition.

Afterwards, over a picnic of *plov*, tea and camel-milk sweets, Zhanara told me she had been shaking. "It was mystical," she said. As we walked back to the

van, a camel, its front legs shackled, grazed with shuffling steps.

We sallied forth across the steppe, bouncing on a rough and winding dirt track. When the great chasm of Bozzyhyra came into view, whatever sense of calm our driver had managed to cling to was abandoned.

He turned the radio to some ear-splitting heavy metal, and steered with speedy intent towards a narrow peninsula jutting into the abyss. I looked around the van, and saw glee on the others' faces. Were they insane? Had I accidentally boarded the Jonestown Express on its final voyage to the desert? Had the visit to Beket-Ata been to prepare our souls for the afterlife?

I wasn't ready for that. I was sweating. We were on the peninsula, speeding right along the edge of the canyon, only a few metres from a 250-metre drop. We veered away, only to begin turning a tight circle that just narrowly cleared the drop on the other side of the cliff. Meanwhile the music blasted out and the others danced in their seats. I wondered if the tea had been spiked with MDMA. Nurman sang, in falsetto, what

sounded like a different song. "Dance!" he said, prying my hand from the seat back. In the rear mirror, I could see mania in the driver's eyes. I couldn't die now, slipping off a cliff like a twig. There was too much to live for: red wine! Hashbrowns! The cool side of the pillow! I'd never read any of the Brontës!

The driver did one, two, three doughnuts, the van leaning as we span in circles, the others screaming in ecstasy.

Finally, we came to a halt, the dust settling around us. I was first out of the van, my palms damp with sweat. It was my turn to shake, but with fear rather than mysticism.

Even in that state, I had to admit, Bozzyhyra was a sight. The scale of it cannot be captured on film. It is the ancient floor of the Tethys Sea, and were it filled with water, the bottom would be beyond the point of light, a place of freak-fish and boat carcasses. The monolithic structures — ship mountain, fang mountain, yurt mountain — appear nearer, and therefore smaller, than they are. Looking to the bottom of the valley, one might estimate the scattered boulders to be human-sized, until a camel sidles near them and is dwarfed in comparison.

The rock itself was crumbling, like walking on 200-year-old Parmesan. The others either didn't notice, or didn't care. They were almost skipping to the

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cliff edge, as though height — or the thought of smashing into the ground far below — was a completely unfamiliar concept. They draped themselves in the Kazakh flag, pulling poses on the threshold of oblivion. I was done with the edge. I could think of it only as a foolish way to die for a picture, for a moment of nationalistic display, for anything.

The Kazakhs had proved themselves to be a people of incredible tolerance. Tolerant of economic change, of foreigners, of even the prospect of death. They were optimistic too. As we piled back into the van, Nurman spotted an eagle high above us. We all looked up, shielding our eyes, searching for the circling figure. Finally, I saw it, a pinkish form against the blue. "A good sign," Nurman said.

"Maybe it means I will go to Canada," said one of the students. "What kind of car do you drive?"

i / DETAILS

For more information on visiting Mangystau, see *Kazakhstan.travel*. Air Astana (*airastana.com*) runs four direct flights weekly between London and Aktau, from £375. Several hotels, such as the Caspian Riviera Grand Palace and Holiday Inn, cater to international tourists. South of the city, a strip of resorts, including the Rixos Water World, offer opulent seaside getaways.

In Aktau, the restaurants Aidyn and Bozjyra serve Kazakh cuisine, including sturgeon, horse and camel, and a wide variety of innovative salads.

Numerous local companies, many of which advertise on social media, offer day trips into the desert to see sights like Bozzyhyra, Shopan-Ata, and Beket-Ata. Multi-day jeep trips with English-speaking guides are offered by companies including MJ Tours and Redmaya Tours



POSTCARD FROM ...

TURKEY

I am sitting cross-legged on a bright yellow sun lounger, acoustic guitar in hand, on the deck of the East Meets West, a mahogany and teak gulet moored off Turkey's Mediterranean coast. A gentle breeze blows across the ship's bow as I strum through the chord sequence for Radiohead's 1995 single "High and Dry". It might sound like a tranquil scene, but my internal monologue is screaming fear.

I recently turned 50 and, partly because I could not justify to myself or my wife the purchase of a red sports car, I decided to make a serious stab at achieving a long-held ambition of becoming a semi-competent guitarist.

Having gained a basic level of ability with riffs, barre chords and the pentatonic scale, I now find myself on my first guitarists' retreat. My fellow musical travellers and I might not be of the standard of The Beatles when they decamped to Rishikesh — that produced the metamorphic White Album, quite a high bar — but the salads, pulses and fresh fish prepared for us by East Meets West's onboard chef are far superior to the spiced food that sent Ringo scuttling home from India.

Our eight-day cruise from Marmaris, around the sun-drenched Göcek islands, to Bozburun, has been organised by The Guitar Social (TGS). A London-based music tutoring start-up, its innovation is to teach budding Eric Claptons as a group, harmonising

as well as covering for the odd sausage finger misplucked by classmates. Our cruise is one of several retreats that TGS runs — there's also a US road trip from Nashville to New Orleans, time in a remote French château and a musical tour through Ireland. And they attract an eclectic mix of people.

On my trip, the students include a Polish emerging markets trader for a hedge fund, a Bavarian doctor of mathematics, a nurse, a retired electrician and a media business co-founder. Our instruments are equally eclectic: alongside semi-acoustics and semi-hollow electrics is a three-string cigar box guitar, a ukulele and a mandolin.

Our leader for the week is TGS founder Thomas Binns, a stick thin 38-year-old Yorkshireman, who rocks a Jarvis Cocker vibe in Tom Ford sunglasses, Eighties football shorts and a selection of Hawaiian shirts. A talented guitar and harmonica player, Binns is also a kind and generous

Matthew Cook



teacher, offering one-on-one tuition on deck to help me improve my picking and introducing me to an exercise to nurture "spaghetti fingers" (a good thing, he assures me) as well as running workshops for the whole group on musical theory and songwriting techniques.

Partly to relieve the tension of music practice, or just to cool off from the 34C heat, we are encouraged to swim in the crystal clear azure waters around the boat in between sessions. It creates a certain rhythm to each day: rise, swim, breakfast, strum, swim again, strum again, lunch, swim, strum, swim, strum, dinner, swim, perform, repeat. Midnight dips are also popular, accompanied (of course) by REM's "Nightswimming".

We break this pattern for one day to travel up the Dalyan River — home to giant loggerhead turtles — cruising past the Byzantine burial tombs carved high in the rocks and stopping to sample the local mudbaths. Apart from that, I have

no need to do as much as put my shoes on. The step count on my health tracker plunges to zero.

None of this however reduces the dread of that first public performance, when the sun sets on the mountains around us and Binns gathers us together around the cushions in the stern of East Meets West.

Only four people are bold enough on that first night to volunteer a song, and that is fine, Binns reassures us. Then, gradually, over the following days the mood among all of us changes as we realise we have nothing to lose.

Those with the bottle to have a go are rewarded with cheers and compliments on elements of the performance. There is something positive to say to everyone, even if, as in my first attempt, you have to restart the piece.

By the end of the week, not only are we all contributing at least one item to the nightly show, but the more brave among us are trying new compositions and preparing pieces together. Before we know it the week has ended, the calluses on our fingertips have hardened and we all feel more accomplished musicians.

Back on home soil, three of us grab the train from Gatwick airport back into London. The carriage is packed with Saturday night revellers and as we try to find some space, a group spots the guitar cases. One asks: "Are you in a band?" I pause, then reply: "Not yet."

Jonathan Moules

Jonathan Moules was a guest of The Guitar Social (*theguitarsocial.com*). The week-long trip costs from £1,595 full-board; the next departure is June 28, 2025. Marmaris is about 90 minutes' drive from the airport at Dalaman