

56939 father of apples

The city of Almaty lies in the foothills of the Ile Alatau mountains in southern Kazakhstan, near its border with Kyrgyzstan. Although there were already settlements in the area dating back to the time of the Silk Road, Almaty's present aspect descends largely from the Soviet era. It is, by appearances, neither an old city, nor in some ways a Kazakh city, having been built up and planned mainly by Russians. In the 19th-century, they founded a fort named Verniy, a far-flung outpost of the Czar, on the site of an old oasis named Almatu, which gradually became today's city of Almaty.

The name of the city is inevitably associated with apples. During the Soviet era and up until 1993, Almaty's official name was Alma-Ata, which in the Turkic language of the Kazakhs, means "father of apples". Indeed, the city lies within a region where unique forests of wild apple trees still cling tenuously to their original habitat, threatened by industrial pollution and urban encroachment. Yet they survive. These foothills are considered today by plant specialists to be the ancestral home of all modern cultivars of apples.

Almaty comprises a strict grid of concrete and brick buildings cleft by streets alongside which often run cement-lined channels running with clear mountain water. Little bridges or impromptu culverts allow pedestrians to pass over these channels from street to sidewalk. Massive poplar trees, chestnuts, spruces and elms grow everywhere. Pyramids of fragrant watermelons are piled up on street corners for sale, while glowering men dressed in suit jackets with shirts open at the necks sit under shade trees nearby, to keep an eye on their wares. Old women sit at card tables along sidewalks and on plazas, to sell cigarettes, matches, paper handkerchiefs, chewing gum, razor blades, and similar sundries. With the sound of trickling water all around and the late summer wind in the trees, many parts of Almaty enjoy an almost pastoral ambience, surprising for a rectilinear city of a million and a half people.

Riding the tram in Almaty requires a sense of adventure and some local knowledge, for the tram stops are very often not marked in any evident way. One develops the practice of simply joining a group of people standing near the tracks who look like they might be waiting for a tram, and then waiting there alongside them.

I rode in an old tram car that was apparently acquired by the city secondhand; the schematic transit maps of another city were still blazoned on its side panels. As we rattled and screeched down the broad avenue, I happened to turn and look back, and was stunned to see a geyser of spraying water and steam erupting in the middle of an intersection that we had just crossed over only moments before. At the next stop, I stepped off and made my way back to see what had happened. By that time, the force of the water had slackened, and I could see that an old conduit for hot water had burst under the street, pushing aside earth

and asphalt, leaving an opening large enough to stop two lanes of traffic. I looked down into the pit of cleanly scoured paving stones and hot mud, and I overheard one bystander say, “All of the city’s pipes are old, so this happens sometimes.”

I came to a Russian-style wooden structure once known as the “officer’s house”, which now houses the Museum of Kazakh Musical Instruments. After browsing the collection, I was approached by a Kazakh gentleman holding a *domyra* (домбыра), a kind of two-stringed lute. He asked me if I’d like to hear him play. I readily agreed. Through his cheerful face, I could see a slight brokenness or weariness about him, but his demeanor grew radiant as he sang. Although he drew his selections from numerous world traditions, he made each of the songs his own, singing and strumming with the professional confidence of a man who makes music for a living. I listened, transfixed.

He then offered to sell me an unlabelled cassette, undoubtedly self-recorded, that included a slip of typewritten notes, and the hand-written signature, “Abylai”.

[image: typewritten-notes.jpg]

It looks like some kind of secret code, but but it is simply Russian, typewritten without spaces. It reads: *Of all 31 songs, 13 written by artist, 18 songs from national composers, which is: Han (Chinese), Indian, Spanish, Italian, Korean, Mongolian, Tatar. All sung in Kazakh language and performed on dombyra by artist, onsalest [sic], actor, poet, composer Abylai Žūmaqanovič Tugelbaev 2004 Almaty. [Signed,] Abylai.*

On another day, on the advice of our guidebook, we made the journey to Barakholka, a large bazaar about nine kilometers from the city center. After a false start that took us about three kilometers out of our way, we finally managed to board the right *marshrutka*, or minibus. Barakholka spreads out over a flat area, and the range of the Tian Shan mountains are faraway but still visible in the clear air. The bazaar consists of a vast collection of cargo containers and improvised shacks made of scrap lumber and corrugated metal sheets. Everything here feels impermanent, as if a strong wind could just blow it away. A network of passageways seems to go on forever. The scene is similar to many such bazaars in cities of the former Soviet Union, it is a frank mixture of ancient sales practices and cheap modern commodities intermingled with all of the materials and goods demanded by local needs. Unsurprisingly, most of the goods came from China. But they came here via a different route than perhaps we’re used to thinking of; China lies only 100 km away, just across the mountains.

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