

Cultural walk to Semey

On hearing Semipalatinsk, most people think atom bomb experiments on the test sites in the Kazakh steppe. Hardly anyone would think of choosing this place as a travel destination. But, the tests have stopped since 1991 and radiation has gone down in the city and its surroundings to significantly below internationally recognized maximum levels of tolerance. There is also much to see in the place. Inhabitants of Semipalatinsk caringly and proudly refer to their city as the spiritual capital of Kazakhstan. In doing so, they can draw from a rich history.

In 1616, word reached Russia about a city by the name of Dorzhinkit. It was supposed to be located on the right bank of the Irtysh, at the site of an ancient Lamaist monastery of Zhungar origin. The city in the fertile Irtysh plain had come in flourish thanks to the trade routes that crossed the river through a nearby wading passage.

The name Semipalatinsk is supposed to go back to the year 1718, when Peter I ordered to turn Dorzhinkit into a fortress including seven palaces that formed the city's center. However, the name was officially given in 1760 to a second fortress that was built on the spot where the present-day city is situated. The reason was that the first fortress, a rectangular wooden structure named Fort Yamyshevsk, was so severely damaged several times by the untamed Irtysh's spring tide that it was decided to choose a better place at a higher level. In 1776, the fortress was moved over a distance of 18 kilometers and named Semipalatinsk. The place swiftly developed into a trade center. By the middle of XIX century, annual revenues from this important transfer place of goods from Russia, China and Central Asia amounted to a million gold rubles. There was no end to the influx of caravans and Semipalatinsk was rich. Ever since, the city's heraldry is adorned with a camel, symbolizing the caravans that used to cross the Irtysh here.

Unlike many people guess, Kazakh name for the place Semey is by no means a derivative from the Russian signification. It comes from an ancient Turkic word

meaning holy or spiritual spt. The Kazakh tribes of old appear to have given this name to the site.

Many of the outstanding personalities of whom today Kazakhstan remains proud to originate from Semipalatinsk, including the great poet Abai Kunanbayev , the writer and founder of Kazakh theater Mukhtar Auezov , the poet and philosopher Shakarim, the founding fathers of the nationalist party Alash Orda and a number of important musicians, singers and other figureheads in cultural life. Some people explain this phenomenon by creative forces with particular magnetic flows and power zones which are supposed to be at work in the area, situated in the very heart of Eurasia. There is, however, also a more secular explanation. In XIX century, the Russian Czars used Semipalatinsk as a place of exile. Those young democracy-minded aristocrats who started to strive for reforms in the czarist autocracy would end up here in 1825. But their exile would not stop these young, well-educated noblemen from proclaiming their ideas. Libraries, museums and schools were opened. Scientific societies and cultural circles were established. In all, though unwittingly, the Czars had done the area an immense favor. Intellectual life in the garrison town made giant steps of progress thanks to the presence of people such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Yevgeny Mikhaelis, four Byeloslyudov brothers and many others. The establishment of the city library goes back to them, as well as that of the Society for Geographic and Statistic Science. Young Kazakhs, eager to learn, like Abai Kunanbayev were absorbed in the company of Russian democrats and an extended mutual enrichment was the result. The formation of personalities like Abai and Shakarim was a natural result of this concentration of brilliant and critical minds at a time when all over Russia social contradictions were crystallizing. Thus, it is by no means sheer coincidence that the founders of the nationalist party Alash Orda, which in 1917 stepped forward to claim independence came from Semipalatinsk. The fact that all of Abai's inheritors including the leadership of Alash Orda, the philosopher Shakarim and the bulk of Kazakh intellectual class with them were to be caught and murdered in 1930s by

so-called People's commissariat for Internal Affairs has been an immeasurable loss for Kazakhstan's and Russia's communities.

It can only be seen as a case of the most gruesome irony in history that it was decided to locate a testing ground for atomic weapons next to a city with such glorious past and reputation.

The entire area of Semipalatinsk used to be forbidden ground. Half a million people used to live here who were not allowed to receive any visitors from the outside world. They lived well enough, though, to the extent that social services and living standards were exceptionally good.

The city's authorities and its citizens have taken some effort to improve its image from the 1990s on. Many buildings have been restored and newly built. Educational and cultural excursions are being organized for both schoolchildren and adults from all over Kazakhstan. Changing the official name back into Semey has been another attempt to make people forget the bitter taste of the name Semipalatinsk has left behind.

The city and its surrounding areas bear many traces of their history in the form of museums and monuments, which have been or are being restored and definitely worth a visit.

The local land and anthropology museum is a good start for a cultural tour around Semipalatinsk. Situated on the corner of Abai Street and Lenin Street, the museum was established as early as 1883 as a library and exhibition space by exiled democrats conducted by Yevgeny Mikhaelis as the Gogol Library. It is hard to underestimate the huge merit of this initiative, which for the first time held a mirror in front of the region through which it could see its own history. The oldest exhibits include a collection of 60 household tools from Kazakh daily life of old, donated to the museum of Abai.

The Museum to the memory of Abai is a must for every visitor to Semey. The monumentally refurbished building harbours a caringly and didactically clever composed collection of exhibits that provide information about the sources of Abai's creative force, about his life and work, his experience – as well as the work

of his students and the way his heritage has lived on in the course of time. Abai's manuscripts, the household tools mentioned earlier and other testimonies of his life and times are impressive, but of most interest are many artistic works depicting the topics and tales in Abai's literature. Wonderful goblins by Shamyk Koshanov and expressive graphics by Yevgeny Sidorkin offer the foreign visitor from the western and central parts of Europe a true reflection of Abai's broad creative imagination. These works can rightfully be included in the most important works of art in Kazakhstan today. The yurts' hall visualizes a very realistic idea of the Kazakh nomad's way of life. The fully-furnished yurt is a masterpiece of craft which makes the visitor share the feeling as described by Abai in his poem "Spring": the joy that fills the hearts of the shepherds and their families when after a long winter they can finally take up their yurts and put them up in the broad, green steppe.

The historic exploration tour around the city continues with a visit to the Museum of Literature in the memory of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The great Russian author spent the second stage of his exile here in Semipalatinsk, from 1854 till 1959, after having spent five years already in the southern Siberian city of Omsk. His work "Notes from the House of the Dead" is dedicated to that first period of his exile. Along with more than a hundred other members of St.Petersburg literary circle, Dostoyevsky was arrested and convicted after a figurehead of the Czar's secret police had received reports on their discussions about Russian serfdom. Literally in the last second before his execution, the verdict of already known writer in Russia was changed into exile.

Once, in Semipalatinsk, Dostoyevsky received the support of the Governor Spiridonov and Baron Wrangel. The latter arranged that the author got his rank of officer and his civil rights back. This made life in exile a lot more comfortable for Dostoyevsky and he could live in relative peace. He met his first great love here, married her and went to live in a two-storied wooden house in so-called Tartar neighborhood. This house with a large building attached to it, today is home to the

museum. A guided tour is a rich eye-opener regarding the man behind the author Dostoyevsky.

Next to the museum there is a metal statue of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and young Kazakh scholar and travelling explorer Chokan Valikhanov. It was made in the memory of many friendly encounters between two men of genius here in Semipalatinsk.

It could come as a surprise to know that Semipalatinsk is also the home of one of Kazakhstan's largest museums of fine arts. Its home is the pompous mansion adorned with pillars, which once belonged to a rich merchant family. It was opened in 1985, after the Moscovite art collector Nevzorov donated 500 works of art from Russia and Europe to it. Its 3000 other works also include Kazakh paintings and sculptures. On the ground floor, temporary exhibitions are displayed.

Once should not fail to pay a visit to the monument "Stronger than Death" on the island Polkonovich, dedicated to the victims of atomic tests. The artistic reference to the forty-year long human endurance is plain but it goes straight to the heart.

The latest landmark is the new bridge, built in 2001, pending over the Irtysh, which is already quite broad here. Its span of 750 meter makes it one of the world's largest of its kind. It was built by Japanese, Turkish and local companies. It looks particularly impressive at night. On its left end, there is a museum which offers an overview of technical details in this masterpiece of work.

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