

Kazan- capital with a K

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Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan, 800 km east of Moscow. Only a little over one hour away by plane. *Kazan* in Tatar means cauldron and I have read somewhere that the city resembles an upturned cauldron. I must say I didn't get the resemblance though I did find Kazan to be a city bubbling over with lots of charm. It's located at a junction between the Volga and Kazanka rivers and, at present, is one of the biggest industrial and commercial centres on the Volga and has a population of about 1.2 million people made up of 77 different nationalities. Greg and I spent a weekend there in high summer and found our visit most worthwhile. A very clean and tidy city, Kazan is doing well economically at a time when other Russian regional cities seem to be doing it hard. One thing I found fascinating about this place was the number of links it has formed with other parts of Europe and the rest of the world over its thousand year history. It gained autonomy in 1990 but signed a bilateral treaty with the Russian Federation in 1994. Following is a diary-like account of our visit 21-23 July 2001.

The place where we stayed

We stayed at the Hotel Safar, the best hotel in Kazan. The hotel is close to the Volga River and about a ten minute walk to the Kremlin.

Good to be out of the office

We arrived late Friday night. The weather was hot all weekend, morning, noon and night. On Saturday morning we began our discovery of the city by walking across the bridge over the Volga River to the Kremlin. The Kremlin walls are all painted white and in excellent condition. Buildings inside the Kremlin contain a number of government administrative offices. The churches there were all under renovation and there is a mosque being built there too.

Museum of the Treasures of Tatarstan

Next we visited the Museum of the Treasures of Tatarstan. It contains the best examples of Tatar culture down the ages, everything from jewellery to clothing to utensils etc. Of all the jewellery I have seen in Russia so far, the Tatar work is some of the brightest and most interesting. The museum building once housed a trade bazaar and its architecture is a treat to the eyes in itself.

Art of the future

In a part of this museum we also met Rakhim, a philosopher who runs a gallery of philosophy. The gallery consists of illustrations of symbols for all sorts of ideas and concepts. Rakhim was happy to explain the meaning of each of the symbols. He plans to publish a book of all these symbols and it should be well worth the wait. You may contact him at www.tatar.museum.ru.



Along the same street

Walking along the same street [Kremlevskaya Ulitsa] are many buildings of great interest. Two in particular are the Passazh which is like a mini GUM shopping arcade. In the centre on the ground floor is a sculpture of a young Chopin in his mother's arms. We were also impressed by the building of the Tatarstan National Library further up the road.

The first thing you catch from the street are the wonderful balconies on the corner of the building. Inside, the library is famous for its Grotto reading room decked out in the form of a cave.

Kazan University

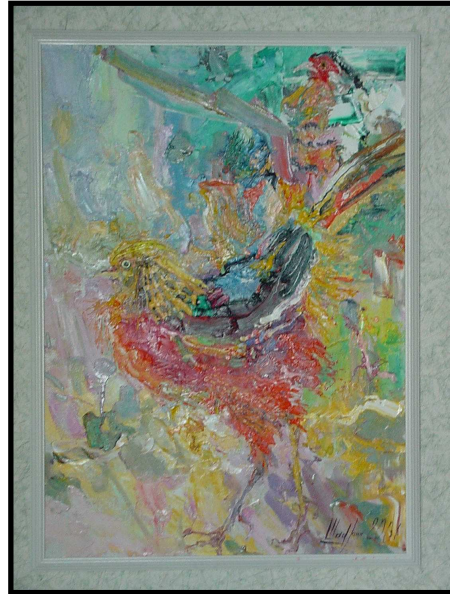
Not far from the library is the famous Kazan University from where Vladimir Lenin was once expelled. Lev Tolstoy also studied here. We dropped inside to have a look around the corridors of knowledge. It was a busy Saturday afternoon. We thought that exams results had just been posted. We saw some great examples of local stained glass windows there too.

Next stop- the Museum of Fine Arts

We next visited the Kazan Museum of Fine Arts where we enjoyed looking at the exhibition of nineteenth and twentieth century Russian art, and displays of glass, silver and gold. The paintings included the work of artists such as Bryullov, Shishkin, Repin, Serov, Feshin, and Kandinsky. Nikolai Feshin (1881-1995) was a local artist highly revered in Kazan. After going through all this, we began negotiations with the ladies in the shop at the entrance for work by local artists. We

concluded these sales the following day. Greg bought up a range of smaller oil paintings by locals. I opted for a larger single oil painting called the Golden Pheasant [Zolotoy Fason] by a local artist named Alexander Shadrin. See the work below.

I am happy with this painting as it features many characteristics of Tatar art. I have since read elsewhere that *"Colour is the basic element of Tatar art...The main distinguishing feature of Tatar painting is polychromy. The Tatars never paint an object in one shade but always make it different by combining several colours. The astonishingly bold combination of pure, primary colours (yellow with green, green with red, yellow with pale blue) is called "the Tatar taste" by the Russians."*



Bauman Street

After a stop at an outdoor beer café located on Tukaya Square, beside the monument to the national poet Tukay, we wandered up to Bauman Street which is like Moscow's Stary Arbat. Only wider and better. You have your small stall-holders selling their arts and crafts and pirate CDs, and your occasional busker, and lots of people strolling along or just sitting around having a drink and a lazy chat. All without the noise of traffic on a sunny afternoon. There are lots of gift shops along the street too. Around the corner from Bauman Street stands the baroque two-story Peter and Paul Cathedral.

Freedom Square

On Sunday morning we headed in to Freedom Square on the bus and then trolleybus. The ride was just like a cheap guided tour of the town with kind old ladies telling us where our stop was. Freedom Square has the obligatory statue to Lenin. Across from that is the Tatar Theatre of Opera and Ballet built in 1956. It is a stunning building where an annual Chaliapin Opera Festival takes place to celebrate the great opera singer's time spent living in Kazan.

Cultural Centre of Kazan

However most of our morning was taken up at the National Cultural Centre of Kazan. It is

a huge display of the history of the Tatar people and has endless exhibits of each big moment in Tatar history and also has lots of contemporary arts and crafts. The lady who walked us through the museum was no doubt a great expert on the subject of the history of Tatarstan.

Gurman- go there

We had lunch at a great place called Gurman. Great because it was air-conditioned, had good food, was quiet and the the prices weren't high. We even resolved to tell the Lonely Planet about this find. After our meal we revisited the Museum of Fine Arts to collect our paintings and then headed off to the Gorky House Museum.

Gorky House Museum

What is famous about this place is that the writer, Maxim Gorky, worked there as an apprentice baker for about 18 months. The bakery is set as it was when he worked there. Gorky owes a lot of his success in writing to the time he spent in Kazan- He makes some comment about him being born somewhere else, but he discovered his soul in Kazan. A large photo of his return to Moscow in 1928 made me realise just how immensely popular he was in the early Soviet days.

A swim in the Volga

After that we went back to the hotel. It was boiling hot that afternoon so I headed down the river to have a swim. The beach was crowded. Just like Bondi. The water was pretty clean- except for the cigarette butts floating on the surface. Luckily I was out of town one week before the widespread report of a cholera outbreak in Kazan which lead to health restrictions on restaurant-going and swimming!

A quirk of history

In early times, the Bolgars people lived in different areas across Europe. For example, there were Bolgars living near the Black Sea. And there were also Bolgars living along the Volga River. The people stemming from the Bolgars on the Black Sea kept their name and live in the area today known as Bulgaria. However through time they lost much of the original language, religion and culture of their ancestors. However they still retained their name. The Bolgars of the Volga Region, on the other hand, have retained their language, culture and religion but have lost their name and are today are better known as Tatars. This group of Bulgars received their Tatar name from the people led by Genghis Khan's grandson, Batu Khan from Mongolia.

The rest of the night unfolded without major dramas. We went back to the Gurman after we had visited a famous sculpture of Lev Tolstoy in a nearby park and we also checked out a few more buildings, such as the ornately decorated colleges situated in that part of town. After Gurman, we wandered down to Bauman Street and met a Tatar called Edward who was

celebrating his birthday with friends. So we stepped into a bar to have a celebratory drink with him and before we knew it it was the early hours of Monday morning.

Monday

First we went back to the library I mentioned above. We wandered through it and checked out the Grotto reading room. Five serious students sat in the peaceful atmosphere of this unique subterranean enclave. Apart from spending a few hours in the Central Department Store Tsum shopping for some last minute authentic Tatarstan souvenirs, the highlight of the day was our visit to the Prometheus Institute which is located within the larger building of the Tupolev Engineering Institute just off Freedom Square.

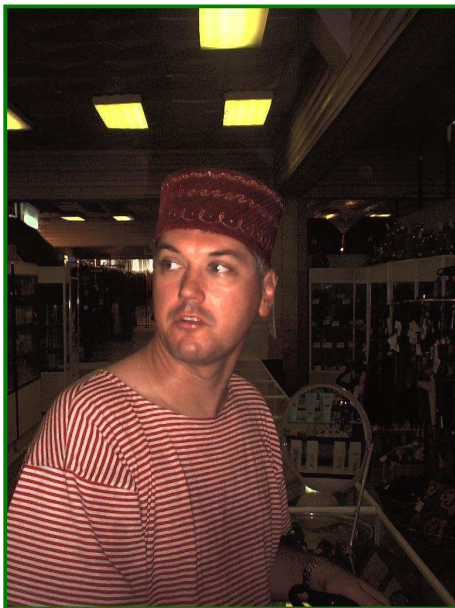
Prometheus Institute

Moscow is a beautiful city in the evening, much due to the special play of the lighting effects on so many of her buildings. During my stay in Russia I have

commented on how the Russians have such a skill with lighting architecture compared to so many other places around the world. And then it all made sense after my visit to the Prometheus Institute in Kazan. Here we have people who have been studying the aesthetics of light for decades. They are true pioneers in their science. Despite our very unannounced arrival, we were given several demonstrations of how music and sound may be translated into light effects. They ranged from swirling colours in tubes to an abstract film based on a piece of music by a composer called Sviridov. The best thing I can do is to refer you to the website. Here you will find an enormous amount of material on the Institute's history and its theories and recent achievements. I not long ago discovered that it was this Institute which was commissioned to provide the lighting in Victory Park down the road from our Moscow apartment. They are also responsible for some of the night lighting at the Kremlin. Check out their site at prometheus.kai.ru.

Critic's Corner

& here's how Greg saw Kazan



On Friday night after work Patrick and I flew to Kazan.

The first 75 minutes of the trip were memorable, in that we didn't get the express train to Domodedovo airport, so caught the nearest car, which got stuck in a humungous traffic jam and then,

when we finally did get some open road, got pulled over by the Gayishniki (traffic police). I ended up showing the cop my plane ticket and in sympathy he told the driver to take us to the airport and then report back, (probably to pick up our fare). He took the guy's licence as collateral.

We rushed into the Domodedovo airport, which looks brand new following an exquisite renovation. Many airlines are moving there from Sheremetyevo, which is well past its use-by date. With only 20 minutes remaining until take off, our check in had well and truly closed. We begged, we became emotional, we lay on the floor, but to no avail. Indifferent airport staff shook their heads, until we found the one who knew the Administrator...

Just another flight out of Moscow...

So we made it onto the Yak 42, into the air and down again.

Kazan. It conjures up exotic images of the Golden Horde, mosque-fulls

of praying Tartars, in combination with all the classic images of Russia and the Volga.

We arrived at 11.00pm. Our hotel in Kazan was called the Safar and was reputedly the best. It seemed to have most things, but not air-conditioning, which I now consider to be the most important thing in the universe.

The first thing we did was go to the cafe and celebrate our arrival with a bottle of Kazan vodka. Within seconds we were surrounded by a swathe of prostitutes. In the end the vodka saved us, as we had become jibbering lunatics.

The churches and mosques of the Kazan Kremlin made a wonderful view from our hotel, so they were our first stop.

From there we visited the Tatarstan Historical Museum. At the rear we found the Filososfskaya Galeraya, a weird place indeed. The "curator" Rakhim has designed a roomful of iconic symbols to represent various philosophies and theories. The one

for "time" was good, showing past, future and now, with "now" divided up into am and pm. And we stumbled onto this symbol at exactly noon...freaky really.

Next we strolled past the truly beautiful National Library and into the Kazan University, famous for having students such as Tolstoy, Gorky, Lenin and Pasha's mum. The library features a reading room called the "Grotto", which looks like a cave full of indoor plants. There is also plenty of the Chinese decorative influence that was popular at the time spread throughout. They have art exhibitions there, and this one was of local artist Induykov.

I later realised that I bought one of his paintings at the Fine Art Gallery Shop. He paints in a socialist realist style. A statue of the mathematician Lobachevsky stands outside. They're smart in Kazan.

From there we headed to other highlights including the Fine Arts Museum, which has some of Russia's big gun 19th century artists, including their local great, Feshin. The Gorky Museum - a bakery - includes not just Gorky, but also Chaliapin, a Kazan boy if there was one.

The main street is Bauman Street. Better than Arbat. One night we met a circus performer who asked us how much an Australian dollar is worth. He had fifty given to him not long ago. The Russian Church on Bauman Street is nice, as is Baroque Church built for Peter the Great around the corner.

"Prometheus" is a wacky old research arm of the engineering department at the Tupulov Technical University. They've been trying to find a scientific connection between sound and light since the 1960s, the aim being to inject some much needed humanities into the engineering

field. I'd heard of it from when my sister was trying to write a thesis on the sound & light connection espoused by Scriabin, the key influence behind this workshop, hence the title "Prometheus". I remember how everyone in her milieu thought that this was totally crazy.

We found the address in our little Tatarstan guidebook. There are no signs and one just asks and eventually gets there. We were introduced to one of the sound and light masters, who gave a quick lecture in the studio, followed by a demo of one of their abstract films from the 1970s (and, I do mean "abstract"!). He also showed us an invention that spins like a rotor and enables one to read words that seem to be inscribed on thin air. I asked our host if it was patented and he shrugged his shoulders... They also light up buildings in an inimitable & ambient way, their main success in Kazan being the circus, which looks like a flying saucer.

The entry for Kazan in the Lonely Planet omitted so much of the above and did nothing to entice a traveller to Kazan. It offered a couple of really bland pages and it seemed that the reviewer could never really have been there! The more I see of Russia, the worse the Lonely Planet becomes, which is sad as there are not many guidebooks that go beyond

Moscow and St Petersburg, which is precisely where one needs to go. Many of their reviews are bitter and twisted and only serve to keep people away. Maybe it's a Western conspiracy to stop them from enjoying Russia. Not only are they negative but there are also many omissions.

They need to take a long hard look at what they've done. And if we followed their advice on flying (particularly the first edition's) in Russia, we wouldn't have gone there. Yes, the Lonely Planet has almost single handedly scared people away from outback Russia. A real shame.

On the other hand, the new Le Petite Fute travel guides on various parts of Russia and the rest of the world are an encouraging sign. My guide to Tatarstan became indispensable. Thanks Le Petite, when can I pick up my airfare? And Lonely Planet, you can go sulk in your cheapy Intourist Hotel and wish that you'd paid ten bucks more.

Kazan National Cultural Centre is where one gets to really learn about the historical and cultural background of Tatarstan. It's actually very thorough and way out there with other cultural museums of similar ilk (like the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa, which is a supreme example). I did pick up the stuff about the Bolgers and the

advent of the Khanate... But who cares about that, when there's a Lenin Monument outside a gothic looking Opera & Ballet Theatre, a Tolstoy statue that beats all others, and discos with names like "Cherchez La Femme" and "Fashion Club"?

We came, we met, we left. We love you Kazan and hope that you love us.

