

# STOPOVER TOUR OF ALMATY



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*Ascension Cathedral*



*Cathedral Interior*

**M**y wife and I joined a 10D/7N tour to Turkey in late October, 2019, using Air Astana, the flag carrier of the Republic of Kazakhstan. For the flight from KL to Istanbul, we had a one-hour transit at the airport in Almaty where the airline is based and another 16-hour transit (6.00 a.m. to 10.00 p.m.) in Almaty for the return flight from Istanbul to K.L.

For the 16-hour transit, Air Astana provided breakfast and hotel accommodation at no additional cost as part of the Stopover Paid By Carrier (STPC) service.

All but two of our tour group of 25 members opted to join a half-day city tour (US\$100 per person) of Almaty during the 16-hour transit; it was arranged by the tour leader and we were provided with a Kazakh local tour guide.

Almaty is the largest city in Kazakhstan and it served as the capital from 1929 to 1997. The capital was relocated in 1997 to Astana, renamed as Nur-Sultan from 23 March, 2019, after long-term president Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned after having been in office since 1990. Kazakhstan was the last Soviet republic to declare independence prior to the dissolution

of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The first place we visited was Kok-Tobe hill which is a popular recreation area with amusement parks on top of a hill 1100 meters above sea level. From the sightseeing platform, we could enjoy the panoramic views of Almaty city.

Then we visited the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan which is acclaimed to be one of the largest museums in Central Asia. It displays collections of Kazakh historical, archaeological, modern cultural and political artifacts. There were interesting exhibitions of equipment of a warrior of the 13th-14th centuries, the Great Silk Road's trade, import items and others.

Next was the Panfilov Park which is one of central Almaty's most popular strolling and hangout places for all ages. The park is named after the Soviet general Ivan Panfilov with a memorial of his 28 soldiers of an Almaty infantry unit who died fighting off Nazi tanks in a village outside Moscow during the World War II in 1941.

The most impressive sight-seeing spot is the Ascension Cathedral, also known as Zenkov Cathedral, located at the heart of the Panfilov Park.

The Ascension Cathedral is a Russian Orthodox cathedral constructed between 1904 and 1907. It is a five-domed and three-aisled structure with a built-in bell tower. The uniqueness of this church building is that it was completely made out of wood and without any nails. It is 56 meters tall and is among the top 8 tallest wooden buildings of the world.

An interesting story about the cathedral is that it survived a magnitude 7.7 earthquake in 1911 with minimal damage, while almost all buildings in the area were damaged. Some bishops attributed it to divine intervention, while others believed that it was due to the construction technology of "anti-seismic basket" invented or employed by the architect, Andrei Pavlovich Zenkov. Wooden beams were fastened with rolling brackets and during the earthquake shake the walls were moving smoothly that provided stability to the building.

Historically, the church faced hardship during the Soviet rule and was forced to be closed in 1927. Then it was robbed, all bells thrown down and the library partially destroyed. It was used to house the Central State Museum until 1994. Finally the Russian Orthodox Church was given back the cathedral's control in 1995 and after undergoing some restoration works, it was reopened for religious service in 1997. Since then and up to now, the cathedral is a sanctuary for hundreds of Christians and a popular attraction for tourists.

The city tour of Almaty was actually not in our original Turkey package tour itinerary, but it turned out to be an eye-opening and enjoyable trip that should be considered a desirable destination by holidaymakers. ■