



RON'S DIARY

BY RON MOON

# Where in the hell is Kazakhstan?

Occasionally, when you're travelling, you discover an unknown location that blows your mind. For us, it's Kazakhstan.

Now tell the truth. Until the comedy film, *Borat*, had you heard of the Republic of Kazakhstan? I've got to say right from the start, though, *Borat* has done Kazakhstan a gross injustice!

Before crossing the border into this relatively new nation – once part of the USSR – we'd taken in Moscow's Red Square, the Kremlin and the city highlights. Here, befuddled by more palaces, fortifications and museums, I had become completely overloaded by such extravagances. It was great to get into the Patrol and hit the road south to the Kazak border. Trucks, buses, crazy car drivers and a rough and rolling bitumen road – along with the odd police checkpoint – meant it was never a boring drive. With a bit of effort each evening we found bush camps a short distance off the road to give us a break from the mayhem.

The border, though, was just a plain hassle; not just for us but for the locals as well. We joined the queues and chatted to the mainly friendly people who were in exactly the same boat and, after eight hours, we were in Kazakhstan looking for a campsite. We chose one with a sweeping view over a vast area of grass and crop-covered steppe with the only trees in sight being those around the occasional farmhouse or village, or planted in rows along the side of the road. It was a scene that remained with us for the next six days.

It is these steppes that have helped form Central Asia's history and culture. This was the natural factory that fuelled the great horse-borne armies of Attila the Hun, Jenghiz (Genghis) Khan and others who, in their age, formed some of the world's greatest empires. Their boundaries stretched from China, west to eastern Europe, and from southern Russia, across Siberia to northern India, Iraq and Syria.

Modern Kazakhstan is a big country (the ninth largest in the world) with a population of 15 million. It's rich with oil, gas and minerals while phenomenal areas of steppe have been put under wheat. The fence-free paddocks are huge, while the tractors and harvesters that work them are old and hark back to the Soviet era.

The landscape became drier as we headed south towards the Aral Sea: low saltbush-type vegetation covered the plains – much like driving through outback SA.

The Aral Sea – once the world's fourth largest lake – is really no more. It was sacrificed back in the 1960s to Soviet propaganda and a desire by the powers-that-be to turn vast areas of the desert steppe into irrigated land to grow cotton.

It ranks as the world's greatest man-made environmental disaster with the lake drying up. In 1987 it split into two and the great fishing ports of Aralisk and Moynaq (in neighboring Uzbekistan) were left hundreds of kilometres from the water. The climate around the once great lake also changed, becoming hotter and drier; wind-blown dust storms brought a variety of health problems to the people, fishing stopped, while the wildlife of the great river deltas that had once fed the lake was devastated (see [cawater-info.net](http://cawater-info.net) for more info).

We found the town of Aralisk a dusty, tired place. The market where we stopped to buy our supplies for the next few days, however, was a lively affair and testimony to the people's toughness and desire to stay where they called home. Down at the harbour a few derelict boats were laid up and the cranes that once loaded and unloaded ships stood stark and unused along what was once the waterline. All the buildings around the wharves were abandoned and empty, their faded interiors a reminder of what had once been.

Further south we crossed the Syr-Darya River, one of the two great streams that fed the Aral Sea. It's now a shadow of its former self, being dwarfed by the irrigation channels not far away that drag its lifeblood out into the desert. And, from what we saw, the water that pours out across this semi-arid country is not used well. Vast areas of water lie stagnating under a hot sun, green scrub covers thousands of unused acres and much of what is under 'cultivation' now grows grass and reeds used for straw and thatching – a poor return for the life giving water that sustains it.

As we turned east and followed the Old Silk Road route through the ancient cities of Turkistan and Shymkent, the irrigated fields became better tended and were growing a more substantial crop of various grains, vegetables and fruit. Here was irrigated water being put to good use – not wasted or used on bloody cotton. Maybe there is a lesson in this for Australia?

But it was the people of this country that took our breath away. Few foreigners travel here and visitors are treated as honoured guests. People were always waving to us, and often stopping to offer help and advice. One young four-

wheeler who had stopped to help us was concerned that my blown headlight may attract police attention, so he took the bulb out of his HiLux Surf and fitted it to my truck. On another occasion we were taken to a café for a Kazak style lunch and when we offered to pay were told that, "You are guests, foreigners do not pay!"

In Almaty, the country's former capital, we found ARB Kazakhstan (the local TJM branch is a short distance away). Once again the staff couldn't do enough for us, helping clean and service our vehicles. They also took us high into the Tian Shan Mountains for a range of 4X4 trips. The scenery here was spectacular, more akin to Switzerland, and we were again gobsmacked at this country's variety and charm.

I'm already planning a return trip. The off-roading, camping, fishing, hunting and the people are just too great an attraction!

Regards,  
Ron And Viv

Fishing boat left high and dry at Aralisk

Modern Kazakhstan is rich with oil, gas and minerals

were abandoned and empty, their faded interiors a reminder of what had once been.

Further south we crossed the Syr-Darya River, one of the two great streams that fed the Aral Sea. It's now a shadow of its former self, being dwarfed by the irrigation channels not far away that drag its lifeblood out into the desert. And, from what we saw, the water that pours out across this semi-arid country is not used well. Vast areas of water lie stagnating under a hot sun, green scrub covers thousands of unused acres and much of what is under 'cultivation' now grows grass and reeds used for straw and thatching – a poor return for the life giving water that sustains it.

As we turned east and followed the Old Silk Road route through the ancient cities of Turkistan and Shymkent, the irrigated fields became better tended and were growing a more substantial crop of various grains, vegetables and fruit. Here was irrigated water being put to good use – not wasted or used on bloody cotton. Maybe there is a lesson in this for Australia?

But it was the people of this country that took our breath away. Few foreigners travel here and visitors are treated as honoured guests. People were always waving to us, and often stopping to offer help and advice. One young four-

From top left: Water crossing in the Asse Valley; Viv stocks up on plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables; two locals with a load of hay; shifting hay for winter; Ron at a roadside stall that sells kebabs, beer and vodka!

From top: 14th Century Mausoleum of Kozha Akhmed Yasau is a World Heritage site; road north of Aral is nothing more than a choice of tracks across desert; Neil, Ron and Rod with some of the ARB Kazakhstan crew