Dear Friends,

My friend Amy (right) has made a career of working with Doctors Without Borders in various hellholes of the world. I planned to visit her in Uganda, but her tour was curtailed before I could get there. I forget why I didn't visit her in Sierra Leone (a true hellhole), but I know why I changed my mind about visiting her in Northern Nigeria: I found out the place she was stationed had an *average* daily temperature of 113°.

But when she was posted to Kyrgyzstan, in Central Asia – actually not a hellhole generally, although perhaps the prisons where her project was based might be – I made plans to go. Since Turkish Airlines is the way into Kyrgyzstan, and they stop in Istanbul anyway, why not stay over for a while? I had been to the fascinating city of Istanbul in 1984 and had longed ever since to go back. Sure, it would be hot in August (I had to go in August because that was the only month Amy had time to see me) – but what the hell, am I not an intrepid traveler? No, it turned out, not quite as intrepid as I thought.

PART I: ISTANBUL, or ONE JEW AGAINST THE SUN

So I flew and I flew, first to New York and then on to Istanbul, and arrived at the very urbane and comfortable Hotel Romance, where I had booked a double room because a single room at the Hotel Romance sounds like the title of a depressing short story. The Romance was conveniently located on the main urban tram line, and had air conditioning and an elevator and a minibar and all mod cons. I had the minibar filled with bottled water (Istanbul is modern city but not so modern you can drink from the tap) and settled in.[1]

This just in: they speak Turkish in Turkey. It is, unsurprisingly, a Turkic language, not part of our Indo-European language family, so it is quite incomprehensible to westerners and (apart from loan words mainly from French, Italian and English) doesn't have cognates to guide the outsider. Fortunately many people in the tourist-frequented areas do speak some English, and some speak it quite well, so I managed all right.

Here's what Turkish looks like (part of a poem by Aşık Veysel Şatıroğlu (1894-1973):

Can kafeste durmaz uçar.	The soul won't stay caged, it flies away.
Dünya bir han konan göçer.	The world is an inn, residents depart.
Ay dolanır yıllar geçer.	The moon wanders, years pass by.
Dostlar beni hatırlasın.	May friends remember me.

[1] Left, the Turkish state emblem (*Türkiye Cumihuryeti* means *Republic of Turkey*); right, the remarkably beautiful and effective national flag, used also under the Ottoman sultans.

- Notice the undotted ı. This character (pronounced sort of like *uh*) was introduced in 1928 when Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, abolished the old Arabic-based Turkish script and substituted a modern one based on the Latin alphabet. Dotted i has İ as its capital form. These letters, ı and İ, are a moderately sure indicator that a text is in Turkish.[2]

Once you figure out a few special accented characters, and realize for example that *c* sounds like *j*, Turkish is easy to pronounce, although still incomprehensible because it is still Turkish. But loan words come out amusingly literal: *tişört* (t-shirt); *asensör* (elevator [French *ascenseur*]). Spoken Turkish sounds a bit like fast slangy demotic regional French, because of the *ö* and *ü* sounds, until you can make out the words; sometimes it sounds like Portuguese because of the *sh* sounds.

I was jetlagged when I arrived, but one thing I could do to keep myself awake until bedtime was get an *Istanbulkart*, so I could take the trams and the ferries without having to keep buying tickets. You can add value to the card at almost every station, but finding the card itself is not so easy. I found one in a newspaper kiosk in the Sirkeci train station, a somewhat down-at-the-heels Ottoman building where the Orient Express used to terminate, and where I first arrived in Istanbul nearly 30 years before.

Once I had the card I made my way by tram to Hagia Sofia, the great sixth century building that was the heart of medieval Constantinople. Built by Justinian and completed in 537, it was the main Christian church of a great Christian empire, and of the Sacred Palace complex itself. Astoundingly, it survives to this day in something close to the shape it was in at its creation.[3] *Hagia Sophia* means *Holy Wisdom* in Greek (in Turkish it is called *Ayasofya*). When the Turks conquered Constantinople in 1453 Hagia Sophia became a mosque; most (but not all) of the figurative decoration was removed, and mosque fittings such as a *mihrab* and a *minbar* were installed (also minarets).[4] Atatürk secularized it in 1931 and it became a museum soon thereafter, which it is still. Ayasofya was the building that definitively solved the problem of how to support a round dome on a square enclosure.[5]

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2 I say *moderately* because some other Turkic languages also use the undotted ı, and a few such as Azerbaijani also use the dotted capital (Azerbaijani went through six alphabets in 70 years). But Azerbaijani has a Ə not used in Turkish. Use of Latin script for Turkic languages was more popular in the 1930s than it is now. Those were the days.

3 It was the largest cathedral in the world for almost 1000 years, until the opening of St. Mary's Cathedral in Seville in 1520.

4 A *mihrab* is a niche facing Mecca, which orients the service and also provides a reflective surface to carry the voice of the imam to the congregation behind him. A *minbar* is a pulpit, reached by a steep attached staircase.

5 Easy – you use pendentives and maybe squinches.

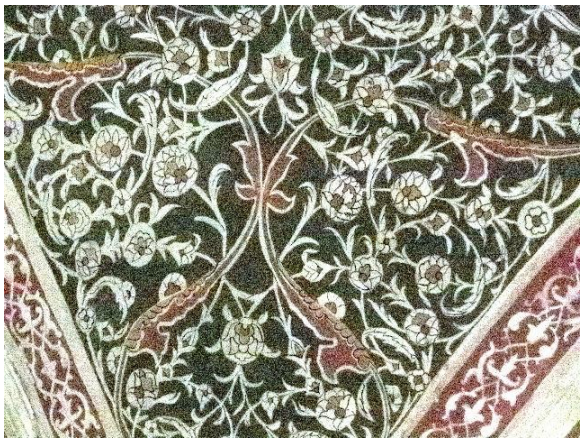
Ayasofya is somewhat shabby now, and worn, and the decoration is badly missed, but even with about 40% of the main interior space covered by screens and scaffolds (for restoration) the place still has undeniable power. A lot of it is the magnificent architecture and lofty interior, but a lot of it is the ghost of the Empire – you can still see the monograms of Justinian and Theodora carved into some of the capitals, and pass through the great bronze door that, back in the day, only the Emperor could use. Some of the mosques built on the plan of Ayasofya are even more successful buildings, but Ayasofya was first, and it is still there.

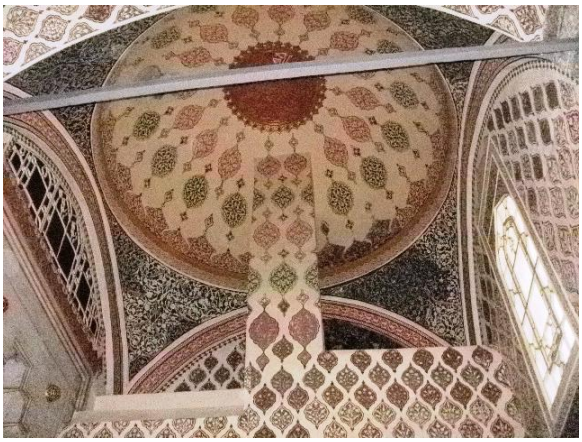
No photograph can capture the interior space of Ayasofya, because it is so vast, and if you pointed a camera at the dome you could not really see anything else. To get everything in you need a lens so distorting as to make the result unrecognizable. But here is one view.

The next day I went to Topkapi Sarayi, the Ottoman imperial palace complex.[6] I walked up the hill in the burning sun – it felt not so much like a mere pizza oven as an industrial oven, the kind they use to fuse the enamel paint onto car bodies. Topkapi has four courtyards – the diagram at left omits the first one (the gate leads into the second). I walked through the first two courtyards under the broiler. There was no water available after the first courtyard; I had to ration what I had. Two tours were offered: the Harem, and everything else. I did the Harem first (the dense complex to the left in the diagram), where the

6 *Topkapı Sarayı* really, but I am leaving the unsettling-looking undotted I, and also the dotted capital, out of the rest of this letter. It would be pedantic as well as bothersome to have to write *İstanbul*.

sultan's wives and concubines and mother lived under the supervision of a caste of eunuchs. I remembered these lovely rooms, with their magnificent decoration and Iznik tiles of blue and green, from my first visit in 1984.





But it was a slog in the heat. When I finally emerged, panting, there was still the fabulous treasury, and the pavilion where a hair from the Prophet's beard is kept, and the calligraphy museum, and lots more still to go (see the red dots on the diagram). I accepted, reluctantly, gasping for air and longing for water and sleep, that trying to go through these other sections of the palace complex that day would be a test of endurance, and I would neither enjoy nor even fairly experience what I was seeing. Better to cut my losses and come back later for the second part of Topkapi. I tried to call a taxi to bring me home but was directed instead to a free shuttle cart that brought me down the hill almost to my hotel. Next time, I thought, I will remember this shuttle for going back up the hill, and at least not *arrive* exhausted.

The next day I set out for Dolmabahçe Palace, one of the "modern" palaces built in the Western style by the last few Ottoman sultans (this one dates from 1856). The sultans showed both their decadence and their *parvenu* gullibility by the gaudy excess with which they decorated their later palaces. Some, like Beylerbeyi, came out well anyway. But despite a few fine rooms, Dolmabahçe is mostly gaudy without charm,

like a bouquet of roses not only blown but wormy. The ceremonial archway (above) sums it up.

I took brisk refreshing rides on two ferries to the pier at Beşiktaş – Istanbul is built on the water and there are ferry routes all over. But to get from there to the palace I had to walk miles beneath the hot sun. I was planning to look into the Naval Museum first as it was right on the way. But the distances were much greater than they looked on the map, especially in my debilitated state, and I had to walk quite a way in the sun just to get to the Naval Museum, and then walk all the way around the building before finding out it was closed, and then walk at least a mile around nearly the entire Dolmabahçe Palace complex just to get to the entrance, and then walk quite a bit more to get to the archway, and then walk through several more unshaded courtyards before I could even enter the building. By the time I got inside I was a wreck.

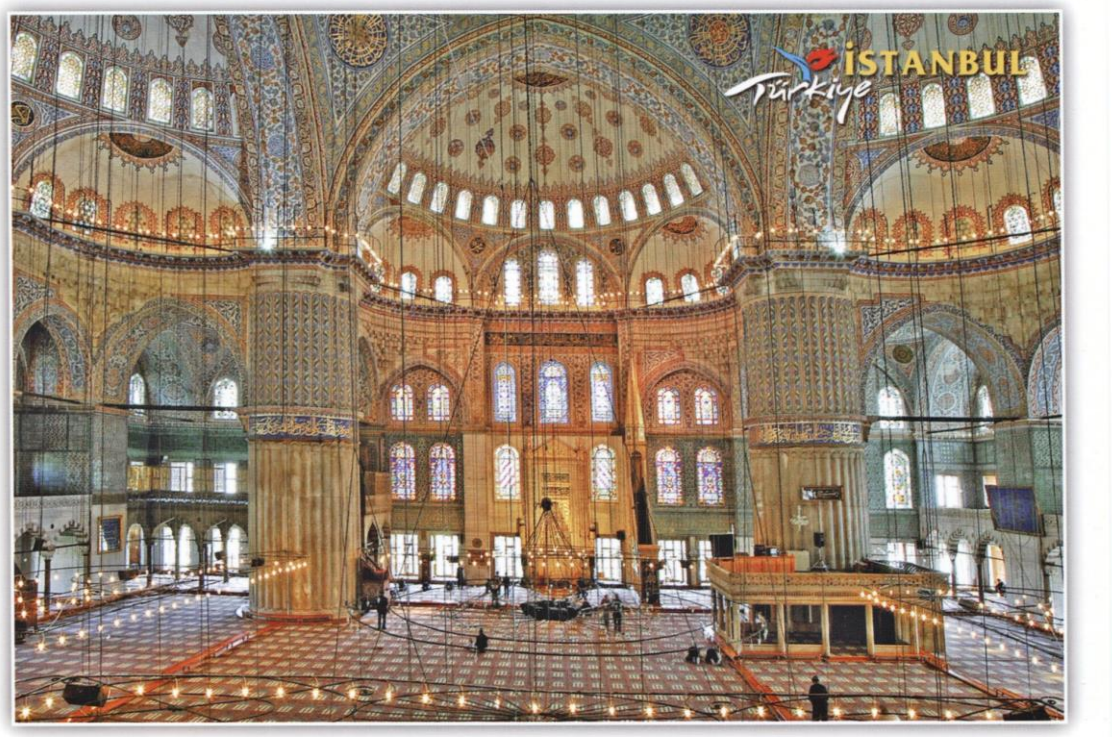
Like Topkapi, Dolmabahçe had two tours – Harem and other. But unlike Topkapi, these tours had to be guided, so we were marched in a large group at top speed through one dim dreary room after another. But the time I finished the first tour it was plain that I was defeated again, and after my epic trek to get there was too wiped out to continue, a conclusion easier to reach than in Topkapi because despite its gross and tawdry opulence, what I was actually seeing was not compellingly interesting. So I left without taking the second tour, and even to leave was an ordeal – to reach the exit I had to walk what seemed endlessly across an unshaded stone parterre in the blazing sun. You could have fried an egg on that parterre, but I didn't have an egg, all I had was a rickety and quickly aging Jew, and he was already fried, bubbling around the edges and beginning to caramelize.[7]

When I finally got back to the entrance I took a taxi to the tram and the tram to the Romance Hotel, stunned, dehydrated, and with perhaps a touch of sunstroke. It was plain that I would have to revise my tourism plans – I could not stroll around the streets of Istanbul, or traipse through difficult-to-access palaces, in the face of the August sun. So I regrouped and decided to rest during the day, except where I knew I could get quickly inside the shelter of a building, and do my exploring in shady streets after the sun was low. Some things I would not be able to see or do – there was no practical way, for example, to visit some inviting imperial pavilions in a hilly park (maybe I could get there in a taxi, but how would I get back again?). But I accepted this limitation in good humor. What I could see, I would see; what I could not see because I had to come in August, I would skip. *Che sera, sera*; I was really only in Istanbul at all because my plane stopped here; I would do what tourism I reasonably could, and not repine over the rest.

My first experiment with sundowner tourism was a visit to the famous Sultanahmet (Blue) Mosque not far from Ayasofya. I went there in the late afternoon and was deeply impressed by one of the most spectacularly beautiful and gracefully proportioned interior spaces in the world. Like other imperial mosques in Istanbul, it was built on more or less the same lines as Ayasofya, but 1000 years later (completed in 1616), and with this added experience the architect was able to create a more refined and harmonious structure, with a unity and coherence even Ayasofya did not have. Also the Blue Mosque retains its original purpose and decoration, which helps. As with Ayasofya, no photograph can give a true impression of the place, but here is a postcard that

[7] I will be 95 next year – well, 70 actually, but as the man says, you are as old as you feel.

does pretty well for the lower part (omitting the dome).[8] If I had seen nothing else in Istanbul, the Blue Mosque would have made the whole trip worthwhile.



Although most visitors were shooed out of the mosque before prayers started, I was allowed to stay, but told a specific place to sit because there would be thousands at the prayer service. I heard the thrilling sound of the *adhan* (call to prayer) sung from the minaret, and then perhaps 200 people came for the service led by the imam, a tiny number for a space the size of the Blue Mosque. After it was over I left, and when I got out of the building I saw the expected thousands coming down all the avenues and approaches of the mosque's grounds, heading for prayer. I asked a European-looking Moslem what was going on. The end of Ramadan, he said; thousands come after breaking their fast.[9] But I was just at the prayer service, I said, and there was almost no one there. It turns out that a Moslem does not have to come to the mosque to pray *immediately* after the *adhan* – he has a couple of hours to get there. The small congregation there at the start knew it would be a mob scene and got in early to beat the crush.

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8 The thin vertical lines in the picture are mostly cables for suspending the mosque lamps, mounted on huge iron rings near ground level.

9 The holiday of *Eid al-Fitr*, marking the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, is called *Şeker Bayramı* in Turkey, meaning *Holiday of Sweets*. And indeed girls were handing out candy outside the mosque.

Istanbul has been a Moslem city since 1453, but it seemed more so now than it did on my first visit in 1984, judging from the way the women were dressed. Atatürk abolished the Caliphate (the religious office held by the Sultans) and set up a determinedly secular state. The Army regarded itself as the guardian of Atatürk's legacy, and intervened to overthrow governments leaning too far toward Islam. But the present Islamist prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (pronounced ER-do-wan), has broken the political power of the Army and is now proceeding more or less as he likes. So there have been regulations making alcohol harder to get, and the number of women wearing *hijab* has grown markedly. Now a scarf over the hair is pretty much normal, although not universal, for women of an age to be married, and it is now disturbingly common to see women veiled (*niqaab*) in one form or another. Even on very hot days women wear baggy gabardine raincoats (so men cannot be maddened by seeing a female shape); long black *abayas* are a common sight, the covering folded sometimes below the chin, sometimes below the nose, and sometimes (extra-creepily) just below the eyes, so there is only a narrow slit to look out of. I didn't see any Afghan-style *burqas*, covering *even* the eyes, but what I did see was upsetting enough. I saw one woman with a thick white mask covering her mouth, which summed up this program pretty clearly.

When I came out of the Blue Mosque (which stands where the Sacred Palace once was) I found myself in a long narrow park with some obelisks in it. This was the Hippodrome of ancient Constantinople, the chariot-racing track that was the center of public life. In the absence of political parties, two of the four racing societies – the blues and the greens – became the core of factions, and their contests and conflicts could suddenly grow very violent.[10] One of those conflicts in 532 turned into a riot and insurrection that almost overthrew Justinian – Procopius, in his *Wars of Justinian*, tells us that it was only the firm resolution of his wife, the Empress Theodora, that kept him from fleeing the city. The place I came out on was about halfway down the length of the Hippodrome, roughly where the *kathisma* (imperial box) connected the Hippodrome with the Palace. All along the Hippodrome families were sitting on the grass and at picnic tables, eating their post-Ramadan meals.

The Sacred Palace is now completely vanished, but some evocative relics of Christian Constantinople do survive. Right at Sultanahmet Square is the remnant of a stone pillar that is all that remains of the *milion*, the Zero Milestone from which all distances in the Empire were measured. Constantine's column still stands, too, and so does a dramatic many-pillared underground cistern.

Istanbul is a very European city in most ways I could see. Certainly this was true in the Old City and in the tourist-frequented areas I traveled to. I did ride some trams to their end stops, though, to see what Istanbul looked like outside the historic center, and the grotty industrial suburbs start fairly close in. But this is so in most European cities, and the grotty parts were Euro-grotty – I could have been in the unfashionable outskirts of Milan or Warsaw.

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10 There were also reds and whites, who didn't matter much except in coalitions.

The tram system is very efficient – sleek red air-conditioned trains come along every few minutes. Often they are jammed with passengers (and tourists from everywhere in the world), and the smell inside is not exactly lilacs, but it is public transportation, what do you expect? New York City subways are not nosegays either. The main downtown tram, the T1, after snaking past Sultanahmet, continues along an avenue which is the same exactly as the old *Mese*, the main street of ancient Constantinople, down to the squares where the fora used to be.

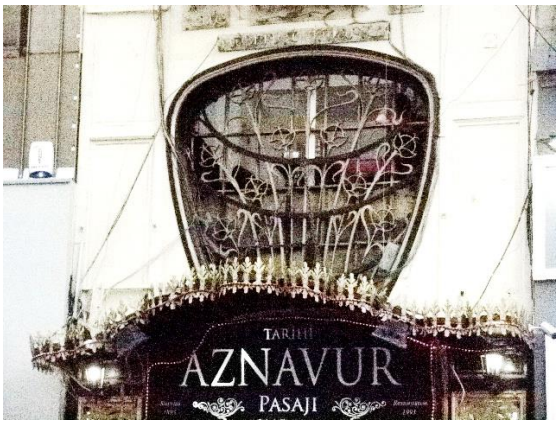
Across the Golden Horn waterway from the Old City lies a district now named Beyoğlu that used to be called Pera (meaning in Greek *the other side*). Pera was the site of a trading concession (really a sort of colony) the Byzantine government gave to the Italian city of Genoa (at the time an important maritime state) in 1273. The Genoese built a massive tower there, called the Galata Tower, which still stands (below left). I visited the Tower and rode up on an elevator – like most such elevators, it did not go all the way up, but the view from the top was worth climbing those extra steps.

Although there are some skyscrapers in the distance, Istanbul from the Galata Tower is still a place of relatively low buildings, red tile roofs, and domes and minarets. Most striking is the activity in the waterway – the Golden Horn and the passages out of the Sea of Marmora and through the Bosporus Strait to the Black Sea (see map).[11] These waters are full of boats and ships of every kind – small fishing boats and patrol boats and pleasure craft, and ferries and excursion boats going all over the area, and huge tankers and container ships and even warships bound for the Black Sea and Russia, or the other way into the Med. I have never seen a more active waterway – as long as I watched I could see dozens of vessels at once, heading in different directions (above right).

11 The red arrow points to the Romance Hotel. The Old City block structure shown on the map is schematic only.

The Galata Tower was a detour from my excursion for the day – to see if I could go from the Gülhane tram stop near my hotel, by tram across the Golden Horn to Karaköy, switch to a funicular that went up the hill to a spot called Tünel, then go up Pera High Street (as it used to be called – now Istiqlal Avenue) on an antique streetcar called quaintly in Turkish *Nostaljik Tramvay* (right), end up at Taksim Square where the famous demonstrations had been, then down on another funicular to Kabataş, the terminus of the T1 tram line, and thence back home. I managed to do this whole circuit just as planned. Taksim Square was quiet, although there was a heavy police presence, including an armored water cannon, just around the corner in case of problems. The base of the monument at the center of the square (it is not really square) has been painted over to hide the slogans. Unfortunately the funiculars were all underground – the name *Tünel* should have been a tip-off.

Pera High Street is a remarkable boulevard architecturally, with many buildings done in the Beaux-Arts and Art Nouveau styles that were so much in fashion in the last days of the Ottoman Empire (which, having backed the wrong side in World War I, fell to Atatürk's revolution in 1922). One popular Ottoman style was a Victorian frame structure with severe square-cornered bays that looks a lot like the ones built in San Francisco during the same period. I went back to Taksim on another day when the sun was low and walked the whole length of Pera High Street – below are some pictures. There were vendors along the street holding baskets of appealing-looking mussels, supposedly on ice. Even though the ice was made from contaminated water, the mussels looked fresh enough to eat, and they sang temptingly to me. But I listened closely to their song, and the words all rhymed with *ptomaine*. So I passed them up.



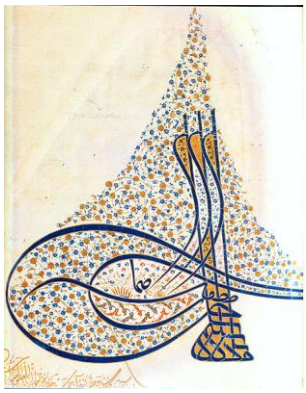
I took a trip up the Bosporus on an excursion boat called the *Şehit Metin Sülüş* (*Şehit* means *Martyr*). The sun was reflected in brilliant white flashes on water of sapphire blue. Green trees and red tiled roofs; sturdy medieval forts and castles only half in ruins; villas and minarets; graceful modern bridges linking the continents (the only such bridges in the world). There were inviting fish restaurants at the final stop (at Anadolu Kavagi, see picture below right), but I stayed on board and waited for the return trip. I would have liked to explore, but there was the sun to consider. When we were underway I was able to sit outside in the breeze and the shade and watch the coasts slide by. The satellite image below shows the Bosporus – I didn't travel the whole way, but it is too beautiful a picture not to include (Europe on the left, Asia on the right; the red arrow points to Old City Istanbul).

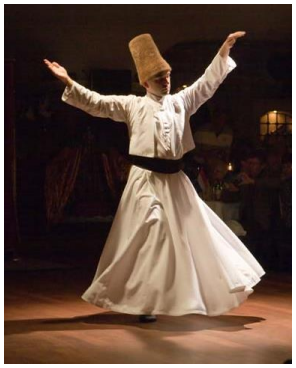
I tried a few other times to beat the sun, but the sun kept winning. I thought I would take the Topkapi shuttle halfway up the hill to the Archaeological Museum, to see its remarkable collections from Byzantium and Troy, and shuttle down again with minimal exposure. But the day I tried this the shuttle was not working because Topkapi itself was closed for Eid al-Fitr, so I walked up the hill only to find that while the Museum was nominally open, almost all the galleries, including both the collections I was aiming for, were shut for restoration. I sat outside the museum in the shade, gathering strength for the return slog, but even sitting in the shade on a hot enough day in Turkish summer can broil a person. I dozed as I sat, and dreamt I was in a pan, browning nicely, potatoes and carrots and onions browning around me, basting every so often in my own juice, roasting like … well, like a Turkey.[12]

Another day when the shuttle was working I went back to Topkapi to do the second part of the tour, but this time (because it was still a Turkish holiday) I found lines at the ticket window stretching around barriers and stanchions and then almost out of sight. I decided against trying

[12] You say the sun is 93 million miles away? Really? It felt like it was just across the street.

to enter – I would be a mess before I even got inside – and took the shuttle back to Gülhane Park, a calm and shady pleasure ground very near my hotel. And I tried for the Army Museum, too, whose bookstore is a rich source of terrific flag and insignia books and which was absolutely *guaranteed* to be open. I went there by taxi, so as to be fresh on arrival, but when I got there it was closed, closed, closed.[13] But why rail at fate? Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.[14] I scurried back into the air conditioning, and remembered what I knew already: don't go sightseeing in the middle of a hot summer!





I did get to the Old Book Bazaar near the Beyazit Mosque (the Beyazit tram stop is right there). This was a smallish precinct just outside the Grand Bazaar, really just a short street and a square, full of small bookshops. Almost none of them had any old books, and even the new books were almost all off my subject, but I did manage to find a few juicy items, including two on the *tughra*, as the Ottoman imperial monogram was called (left: a 16th century example). I went to an old building near the train station for a performance by the famous whirling dervishes (right). Although the dancing grew tedious after a while, it was another of those famous sights I'm glad I saw.

And the candy! Turkish Delight is a sort of sweet tough gelatin, sometimes with pistachios. Shop after shop was filled with hundreds of varieties. To me, as a diabetic, it whispered *come on,* HAVE *a pound or two, death isn't so bad really, not compared with candy! Go ahead,* HAVE *some, everyone dies of something!* I did eat some, too, but not a hundredth of what I wanted to.

Then, finally, my Turkish interlude was over, and it was time to fly to Osh.

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13 It is a good thing I didn't let the taxi driver drop me at the entrance to the museum complex, as he wanted to – it was at least a mile from the actual museum, and the American consul would have had to come and collect my bleached and desiccated skeleton for shipment home.

14 Job 5:7.

PART II: CENTRAL ASIA, or MAY I HAVE THESE STANS?

Kyrgyzstan

Turkish Airlines landed me in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, at the convenient hour of 2:30 in the morning.[15] I waited in a long line in a dimly-lighted second-world arrival hall to get my passport stamped. Chinese businessmen pushed ahead in the line, and I found myself behind the one traveler who had a real visa problem, so it was half an hour before I cleared the arrival hall and met Amy and Ravshan, the driver she had engaged for me. We drove through the empty streets (and were stopped by the police for doing so) to Lada's "Guest House Zhukov," where Amy had taken a whole house for me, down two alleys and through a green iron gate. Air-conditioned living room, three bedrooms, western-style bathroom with hot shower, kitchen with fridge, and English-speaking hostess, for $33 a night including an elaborate breakfast.

Stan is a Persian suffix meaning *country* or *home*. Lots of countries and sub-national areas and aspirational states use it as part of their names.[16] But when people speak of *the Stans*, as I do in this letter, it usually means five adjacent former Soviet republics in Central Asia of more-or-less Turkic ethnicity: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Although they are successor states to the Soviet Union, they were not states before the Soviet Union. Rather they were formed as administrative units by the Soviet government under Stalin, out of territory that had fallen to advancing Russian colonialism in the 19th century. All five of these Stans became constituent "republics" of the Soviet Union between 1924 and 1936.

We do not usually think of Russia as a colonial power, because unlike other European countries its empire was not a maritime one, dispersed over the seas. But the Russian Empire under the Tsars advanced relentlessly eastward (and southward) across Asia (as well as over parts of Eastern Europe like Poland and Finland and what became the Baltic States) from the 16th century almost to the 20th.[17] This is how it came to be the largest country in the world, which it still is even after shedding 14 constituent republics. Russia overwhelmed Moslem states like Bohkara, Khiva and Kokand (in what is now Uzbekistan), and Moslem peoples like the Kazakhs and Tajiks who were not organized into modern states.

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15 Arms at left; flag at right. The device on the flag, called a *tündük*, represents the opening at the top of a yurt, with the cross-members visible (see photo on page 17 below). The 40 rays of the sun stand for the 40 warriors in the company of Manas, the semi-mythical hero of the Kyrgyz national epic. Kyrgyzstan is not the same as Kurdistan, the state the Kurds hope to found someday in the Middle East.

16 Here's a list.

17 See the map on the next page; for a closer view of it, look here.

The resulting units were not ethnically homogeneous, partly by Stalin's deliberate design, partly because of faulty classification (using language as the only criterion), and partly because populations moved around, in response to government fiat or other policies (many of the Kyrgyz, already a mixed population, fled to China to avoid persecution). A substantial presence of ethnic Russians spiced the mixture.

As a result, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the boundaries of the successor states did not exactly follow ethnic lines, and a situation was created much like that in Africa, where arbitrary colonial borders had to serve successor states with mixed populations and ethnic minorities. This explains, for example, the communal tensions in Kyrgyzstan between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks that led to so much horrible violence in Osh and elsewhere in 1990 and again in 2010.

Osh, second city of Kyrgyzstan (even shorter in Cyrillic: Ош), is laid out around a small mountain. It is a city of low buildings, heavy on concrete and cinder blocks and stucco over mud brick. As in so many cities where the action is in inner courtyards, the streets of Osh present mostly doors and walls and gates and fences. There are modern advertising signs in the downtown – all in Cyrillic script, some in Kyrgyz and some in Russian, the *lingua franca*.[18] Traffic jams – Amy tells me Kyrgyzstan has the highest rate of vehicular accidents in the world, and I can see why.

18 Not all that *franca* to me, though, as I can't read Russian. I can read the alphabet, and even tell whether the words are in Russian or Kyrgyz – certain letters like Ө and Ң are not used in modern Russian, and neither are some combinations like *уу*. But except for obvious loan words like Интернет (Internet), I can't understand what I am reading. I am told that the law permits signs only in Kyrgyz, Russian and English, but not in the language of the substantial Uzbek minority.

There is not a lot of sightseeing to do in Osh. There are some public buildings in the Soviet style, some heroic sculptures and portrait busts covered in gold paint, a statue of Lenin, a bazaar featuring Chinese imports, a few uninteresting museums, and a mountain with a landform on it called Solomon's Throne. But there is ample street life, with people selling fruit and vegetables and delicious fresh bread bazaar-style from stalls and little piles, and much busy activity the purpose of which was of course unknown to me. People (except for Russians) look very Asian – not Chinese, but definitely not European. Despite being a Moslem country, the women do not seem cowed or in *purdah*. Women wear scarves, and often (especially among older women) ample flowing dresses, but veils are very rare indeed. Many people of both sexes have their upper teeth fully capped in gold.

I wanted to see some of the countryside, so Ravshan planned a trip to a distant waterfall. Out we went among featureless grassy hills. The pavement stopped and the road became a bonejarring rutted horror. A big sign announced in Cyrillic characters that the Chinese People would fix this road when they got around to it (not yet).[19] Big outcroppings of rock. Fields of cotton and corn and tobacco, some animals. Hills, green in May but brown in August, got rougher. It began to rain. Look: gravel being mined for a cement plant! The hills became more defined, but the road was making me feel like an egg in a blender. Where were we exactly, and why were we here? We had gone only 20 kilometers (12 miles) – it would be 20 more to Nookat, and then 50 more after that to the waterfall, for a total of 90 km, plus of course the same 90 km back. That better be some waterfall! After a little longer I called a halt and we turned around.

My camera stopped working on the road to Nookat. In the United States cheap electronics like my camera are not repairable – usually you have to discard them and buy another. But in the wider world this is not so – we took the camera to a little shop Ravshan knew, littered with bits of electronics and old televisions. The owner was at the mosque – could we come back in an hour? So we went to lunch, and after lunch the camera guy fixed my camera for $10 (probably a special foreigners-only rate, but still a good deal).

Lunch was memorable too – the food was good everywhere in Kyrgyzstan (except in my Bishkek hotel). *Shashlik* (hunks of mutton roasted on sword-like skewers) was almost always delicious, richer and more flavorful than American meat raised on processed feed and antibiotics. These sheep were raised on what grew unaided in Kyrgyz meadows, and tasted like it. The same was true of the vegetables, so different from those from Safeway. Oily rice *pilaf* was good too. And bread, round like a giant bialy, always fresh from the oven. Melons everywhere in big piles, truckloads, mountains of melons, I've never seen so many melons, all ripe and sweet and juicy. A special delicacy: gobbets of fried sheep fat![20]

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19 There was evidence of Chinese and Turkish cultural and economic penetration – schools, import bazaars, construction projects – all over Osh.

20 These are made from the tails of fat-tailed sheep (below left), and look sort of like home-fried potatoes. I tried one. It was not bad, but one was enough.

Ravshan took me to Uzgen to see the animal market. By the time we got there most of the trading had been done, horses had been loaded onto trucks, goats were trussed up and stashed in car trunks. But there was still some action in the horse area – kids on horses, horse-shoeing, informal skirmishes in the Kyrgyz "national game" of fighting on horseback.[21] It was still a genuine horse culture, which is why it was so surprising to see horses treated very roughly, bits fitted so tightly their mouths bled, beaten with whip handles to make them get up when they fell while hobbled for shoeing.[22] Men in Kyrgyzstan really do wear those hats.



I asked to see a slum in Osh, to get an idea how the other half lived. Ravshan took me to a Tajik district (there were some Indians and Roma nearby too). Tin roofs, mud walls, home-made bricks; running water from a hole in a pipeline (below center). But poor and rough as it was, it was not a steaming sink of despair like slums in India. People looked cheerful enough, although sometimes tired, and I noticed electricity wires leading into some of the houses. If I had to live in an Asian slum, I'd rather be in Osh than in Calcutta.



Amy came with me on a trip to Saratash in the foothills of the Pamirs, if you can call them foothills when the elevation at Talduk Pass was 3558 meters (11,673 feet). Mountains (of course), alpine meadows, animals grazing, goats scrambling up steep hillsides, donkeys standing in the road, a bunch of yaks. Herds of horses and sheep looked tiny against the hugeness of the

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21 It is called *Otta Kurush*. I looked for the special game where horsemen use the body of a goat like a polo ball, but couldn't find it – apparently it is not played much in the summer because the horses have to work.

22 I finally understood how nails can be used horse-shoeing without hurting the horse. The nails are driven through the edge of the hoof at an angle, and then snipped off where they come out the side.

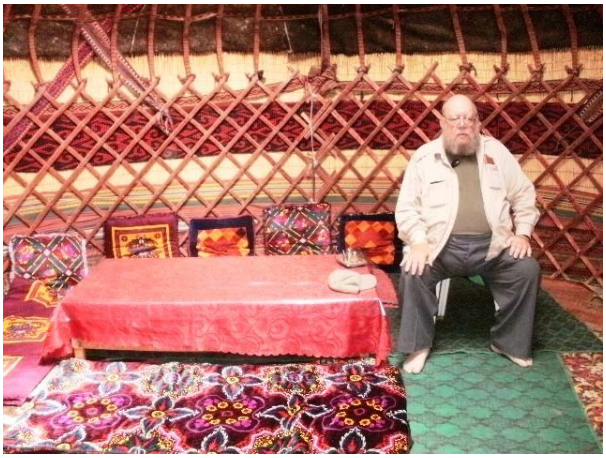
mountain meadows. We had lunch in a yurt where Ravshan knew people – delicious mutton and potatoes spiced just right. The yurt was in the traditional style, *tündük* at the top, sides of felt, bracing members held together with leather rivets so they could be collapsed for moving. On the next page: pictures of our yurt, and of a similar yurt completely broken down so it could be carried by one horse (or two donkeys). Beyond, in the freshest of air, were the snowy peaks of the Little Pamirs. It made a person wonder about the Big Pamirs.[23]

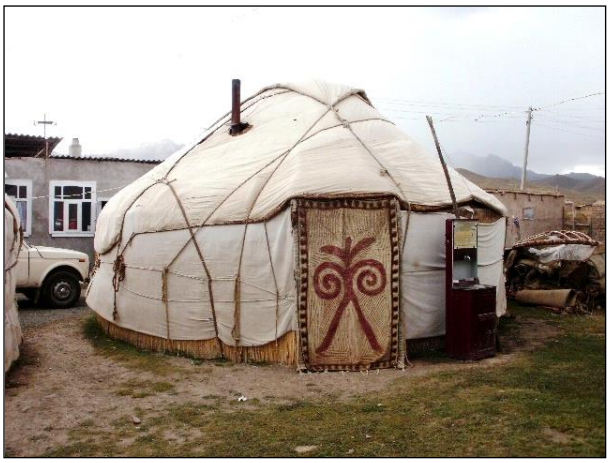
THE TRIP TO SARATASH (INCLUDING YAKS)

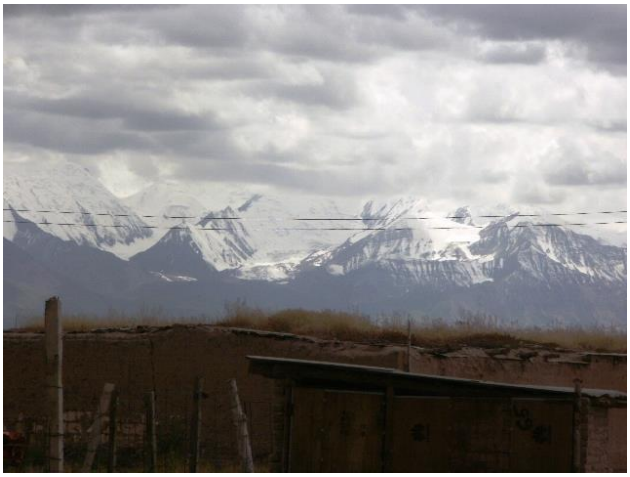
[23] The biggest of the Big Pamirs rises to 7,495 meters (24,590 feet). While planning the trip I considered crossing into Tajikistan, but found that the path went over a windy, sometimes snowy, jeep-requiring 14,000-foot Pamir pass, descending to a small group of yurts as the only reasonably accessible destination on the other side. A German tourist filmed this crossing and wrote: *Blauer Himmel, aber ein unglaublich starker und kalter Wind* (blue sky, but an unbelievably strong and cold wind). I decided to let these yurts pass from me.

LUNCH AT SARATASH

(TOP RIGHT: TÜNDÜK; BOTTOM LEFT: LITTLE PAMIRS)[24]







[24] The last picture is from the animal market at Uzgen, but this is the only page I could fit it on.

Uzbekistan

Osh is very close to the border of Uzbekistan (arms at left, beautiful flag at right) – why not go there too, and add another country? I arranged for an exorbitantly priced visa and picked it up in New York in May.[25] Ravshan himself could easily cross into Uzbekistan, but not with his car, so he arranged for another driver in another car to meet me over the line. I carried a yellow umbrella so the new driver could recognize me. I also equipped myself with piles of nearly worthless Uzbekistan money (see below) – $100 gets you four thick brick-like stacks of banknotes.[26]

After the border came an awful, boring highway. Most of the buildings by the side of the road had been deliberately destroyed or at least badly damaged when the government decided to widen the road (a project that hardly seemed necessary). I had seen the same thing in Ethiopia – a government decision, and then a wrecking ball breaking people's homes and shops in half; desperate efforts at repair with mud bricks and tin roofing. I don't know for certain that compensation for the people affected was inadequate, but it certainly looked like it. Even the areas not affected by the proposed widening had all the charm of an outlying Moscow suburb.

I had a hotel reservation for two days in Andijan, a city I chose only because it was the nearest one to the border. It is one of the worst places I've ever been, not because it is a steaming slum (it's not), but because they have torn down or "rebuilt" nearly every old building in town and deliberately made it look like the *ersatz* Towne Square in a midwestern mall. It is beyond awful. I asked my driver's daughter, who was my interpreter (although she barely spoke English despite being a high school English teacher!) what there was to see in Andijan and the answer was "new modern

25 Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan still adhere to the unfriendly Soviet-era practice of making visas expensive and hard to get – you have to show hotel reservations and itineraries, write letters explaining the purpose of your trip, sometimes show letters of introduction, etc. A few years ago Kyrgyzstan thought: why are we doing this? Don't we *want* tourists to come and hike and ski down our mountains and spend lots of money here? So they changed (for most visitors) to a free, easy, stamp-you-in-at-the-airport system, as in Europe.

26 The picture shows what I had left after I exchanged three bricks of lower-denomination banknotes for one more manageable brick of 1000-som notes, the largest available (worth about 50 cents each).

streets."[27] Andijan made me nostalgic for Osh, which while no beauty spot at least had some integrity. Andijan proved that a place can have horror without squalor.

The next day we went out into the countryside. After the same boring highway, there were desolate deserty hills strewn with garbage and old plastic bags – I had seen this in India but not in Kyrgyzstan. But there was pleasant farmland beyond – cotton fields and some animals. Chickens, villages of stucco over dried mud bricks, one-story houses with perhaps a loft, tin roofs, a sort of town called Kulla. Dreary, but not poison like Andijan. We kept to the main road because the side roads were so bad – I did venture down some of them, but in the heat of the day there was no one around. Here's a home-made waterwheel I saw on the road to Kulla.

We stopped for a roadside lunch, but I only thought it safe to eat the delicious fresh bread, so hot from the oven I could hardly touch it. This seems more like it, I thought, what Uzbekistan must be outside the deadly orbit of Andijan. Flowers; windbreaks of cypress-looking trees; still more cotton. I realize there is a lot more to Uzbekistan than I saw. I did not go to the old cities, like Samarkand and Tashkent, of which I understand there is not much left anyway that predates the Soviets, but still.[28] Finally, after a second night in Andijan, we headed back to the border, where customs officials in green Russian-style military hats threatened to arrest me for having prescription sleeping pills.

Although there were lots of signs in Cyrillic, the Uzbek language is officially written in Latin characters, and pretty forbidding it looks, too. Here's a sample.

Barcha odamlar erkin, qadr-qimmat va huquqlarda teng bo'lib tug'iladilar. Ular aql va vijdon sohibidirlar va bir-birlari ila birodarlarcha muomala qilishlari zarur.	All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.[29]

27 I also asked to see where the poor people lived. Answer: there are no poor people in Uzbekistan.

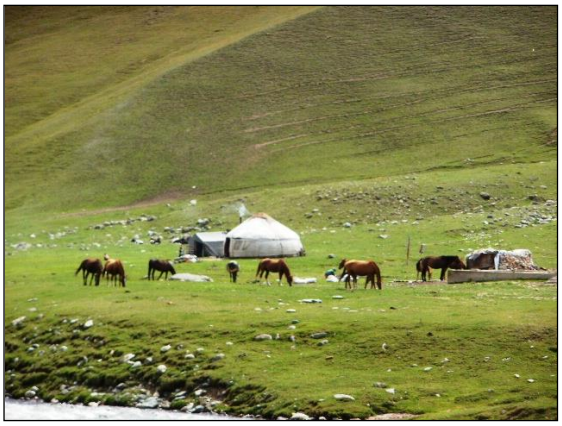
28 In theory I may return some day to see the rest of Uzbekistan – but not until after I have gone back to Italy at least another 28 times.

29 Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The name of the country, showing Irish influence, is written *O'Zbekiston*.

Kyrgyzstan again

After the dreariness of Uzbekistan, it felt like a homecoming to be back in Kyrgyzstan in Ravshan's little Korean car. He met me at the same crossing I had gone over a few days before – all the more convenient crossings were closed – and we headed toward the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek. At first it was flat agricultural land, wheat and hay (mostly reaped by now) and corn; cattle and horses, calves and colts, goats and fat-tailed sheep.

Then we caught sight of distant hills, and the hills drew closer, and beyond them we saw the high mountains of the Talus Ala-Too Range. Yurts lined the road; animals grazed on vast and dramatically tilted meadows. It seemed like a *pastiche* of all the western states: Nebraska with its grassy plains and farms, Nevada's pale brown and silvery gray hills, Colorado's high peaks, Arizona and Utah with craggy landforms and striated mesas, on the whole like Montana and Colorado somehow mixed together, or averaged. (Left: Ravshan.)



The trip to Bishkek took two days, and we broke our journey in Toktogul, on a scenic lake where Ravshan knew a hotel.[30] We ate delicious fried king fish and watched the sun set over the water – very picturesque.[31] Once over the pass at Töö-Ashuu[32] (3586 meters, 11,765 feet), the next

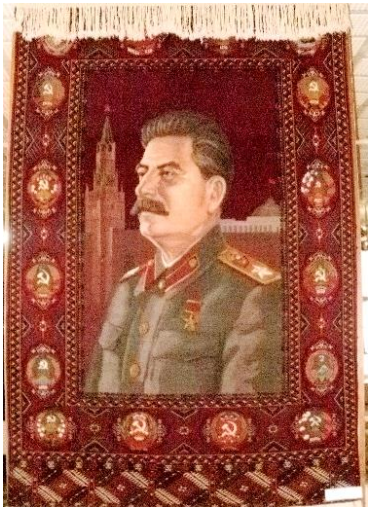
30 The town is named for the Kyrgyz national composer Toktogul Satylganov (1864-1933), author of "What Woman Gave Birth to Such a Person as Lenin?," which is not sung all that much any more.

31 Wikipedia lists 12 fish under the title *king fish*, but none of them seems to have a range anywhere near Kyrgyzstan. Who knows what the fish actually were? They were said to have been caught in the lake.

32 *Gesundheit!*

day, we encountered level farmland again, although much higher than at the start of the journey. And then we arrived in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan.[33]

Bishkek seemed to be a reasonably together city. The downtown had some leafy respectability – it is said to be one of the greenest capitals in the world reckoned by square meters per head. Out of center it loses charm fast. The National History Museum is very heavy on Communism, with lots of gold-painted socialist-realist statuary groups – my favorite item was a portrait of Stalin woven into a carpet. The Grand Hotel was very pleasant, and had a soft cool shady birdsong garden courtyard with tables and chairs under the balconies.



I had a lot of time in Bishkek – originally Amy and I had planned to spend a few days at Lake Issyk-Kul, but in the end she could not go. So I decided to skip the lake – my only real interest in it, distant as it was, had been that Amy wanted to go there. I made up a lot of that time in the hotel courtyard, resting and reading books. I did take an excursion to the nearby Ala-Archa National Park. Although primarily a trailhead for hikers, it was lovely enough even in a car: high mountains, but also angled meadows, pine forests, fast-running rapids in a shallow gorge. There were lots of wildflowers, and thick high weedy ferny brush; I had not seen much of either elsewhere in Kyrgyzstan in August.

Finally the time came to leave for Kazakhstan. Not that I'm counting, of course, but there are nine province or province-level jurisdictions in Kyrgyzstan, and I have been to six of them. I'm just saying.[34]

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33 In the Soviet period Bishkek was called Frunze, after Mikhail Frunze (1885-1925), an early Bolshevik and military hero, a friend of Lenin's, who was born there.

34 Bishkek City, Chuy, Jalal-Abad, Osh, Osh City, Talas. I am missing Batken in the extreme southwest and Issyk-Kul and Naryn on the Chinese border. If I had made it to the lake I would have had Issyk-Kul also. Maybe next time.

Kazakhstan

The driver Ravshan found for me to continue with dropped me at the border crossing, promising to meet me at the other side, in Kazakhstan.[35] Kazakh customs waved me through, but the driver had taken my half-payment back to Andijan and left me abandoned in the hot sun with no car and no Russian. I found another driver,[36] and we drove the 150 miles to Almaty in the 94° heat (no air conditioning). Lovely green and gold plains and meadows (the famous steppes, see below), almost no people, mountains to the south – it looked like Wyoming. Horses capering and gamboling in the empty pastures – no fences, could these be wild horses? I have never seen domestic horses act like that. A cloud of eagles circled over something appetizing, looking just like the eagle on the national flag (right).[37]

But suddenly we were out of the steppes and into the worst suburban strip ever (except for the donkeys on the median), and after that an urban traffic horror. The driver could not find my hotel, and although I had the address I could not help him. Finally we got there and I checked into the downscale and extremely unfriendly Turkestan Hotel. Comfortable room – a suite actually, with air conditioning, a fridge, a desk, four or five huge uncomfortable armchairs, and two balconies, at about the cost of a Motel 6. But what was I doing here in Kazakhstan anyway? My only goal was to get here – now I'm here, now what?

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35 The Kazakhs are not the same as the Cossacks that scared my great-grandparents out of the Russian Empire. Wikipedia says: "The word *Kazakh* stems largely from a Russian convention seeking to distinguish the Qazaqs of the steppes from the Cossacks of the Russian imperial military." Kazakh = Казах; Cossack = Казак.

36 *Almaty?* asked the driver, seeing me forlorn on the roadside with my luggage. *Da*, I said; *tenge* [the Kazakh currency]? He told me in Russian. I said *nye Russki* (which isn't quite the right way to say *no Russian* but worked), made writing gestures, and handed him my notebook. He wrote the number down. I said OK (the universal word). And we were off.

37 Note the *tündük* symbol again on the Kazakh national emblem (above left).

But that was a question for tomorrow. I saw in Cyrillic they had *doner kebab* across the street. I went down and ordered some to go, saying *da* for the meat and the tortilla, *nyet* for the salad greens and yogurt and hot sauce, got some icy-cold bottled water, bought a baloney for breakfast that looked sealed and highly processed enough to be sterile (very good, it turned out, and better than trying room service in Russian) and settled into the air conditioning and *Moby Dick*.[38]

The hotel found some bookstores for me in the phone book – I don't know if they were the *best* choices as I couldn't read the phone book, but I had to accept that these were the ones Fate intended for me to visit. They also found me a driver who was willing to drive me to them in his black Mercedes, one after another, and wait for me while I inquired (using a Russian text I had in my notebook) whether they had anything on *flagi*, *gerbi*, *znaki* or similar topics.[39] I did find one interesting book, but the main value of the afternoon was driving around Almaty, quite a handsome city (in the down-town area anyway) because of the tall, graceful trees screening the mostly undistinguished Soviet-style buildings. On a *very* superficial look, Almaty (in Soviet days called by the more romantic-sounding name Alma-Ata), even though no longer the capital, seemed like a more together place even than Bishkek. I tried to regard the zany madcap Central Asian driving style as just part of the fun. (Above left: the very charming civic arms of Almaty.)

Toward evening of the same day I walked the few blocks from my hotel to the Cathedral of the Holy Ascension, also called the Zenkov Cathedral after its architect, and said to be the second-tallest wooden building in the world.[40] It was a dramatic structure, gaily painted in geometric patterns.

By good luck I was just in time for a full-dress Russian Orthodox blowout, the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos.[41] It was a spectacular display – the church was packed. Clergy and acolytes wore gorgeously brocaded vestments of yellow and light blue in the exact shades of the

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38 Later I found a stall that sold whole roasted chickens. Yum! Better than the *doner* and the baloney.

39 Flags, coats of arms, badges or emblems.

40 Just behind St. George's Cathedral in Georgetown, Guyana.

41 The death of the Virgin Mary (*Theotokos* = Birth-Giver of God), immediately prior to her bodily assumption into heaven. This is a major feast in the Orthodox Church, with its own forefeast,

(*footnote continues*) →

Kazakh national flag. In the center stood a young bearded bishop, wearing an embroidered miter and carrying a staff headed with two silver serpents,[42] using a paintbrush to paint crosses (in holy water or maybe oil) on the foreheads of an endless stream of worshippers. Behind him two readers recited a Russian liturgy in strong, virile bass and baritone voices, alternating with male and female choirs. A high iconostasis (right) made of five rows of golden icons separated the body of the church from the sanctuary. Incense! An elaborate ritual with long overlapping lighted tapers! Then the lights went down and the door of the iconostasis was shut, leaving the church lit only by stained-glass windows and candles reflecting off the gilding. After another ritual shielded from view the clergy reappeared, clothed now in black rather than blue and gold. I left during the bishop's sermon, which naturally was in Russian, and sat in the park outside. When the service was over the bells began, antiphonally (as with the readers and choirs) exchanging deep tones with high melodic ones. The whole thing was a remarkable experience, and the best thing I saw in the Stans.[43]

The Dormition service was the climax of my visit to Central Asia, but it still left me with two more days in Almaty. There were some things I wanted to do – get into the countryside, take some trams, and ride up a cable car to a run-down amusement park on a bluff overlooking the city. But I didn't want to do them all that much, it seemed, not enough to overcome the heat and my exhaustion and the seemingly principled refusal of my hotel to help me find a driver who spoke at least a little English.[44] I could, for example, have waited until the sun was low, taken a Russian-speaking taxi to the cable car, ridden up, looked around, ridden back down, and cast about for a taxi to bring me back home after night fell. But suppose I could not find a return taxi? In Almaty people flag down every private car they see, hoping to negotiate a black-market ride; I did this myself in Russia some years ago. It would have been an adventure. But the truth was that I was at the end of my stamina and didn't want an adventure. What I really wanted was

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(*footnote continues*…)

afterfeasts, and quasi-Lenten fasting season beforehand. The icon of the Dormition shown above on this page was painted in Russia by Theophanes the Greek (1340-1410).

42 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." John 3:14.

43 I don't have any pictures – the image of the iconostasis was taken from the Internet. It would have been disrespectful and unseemly to take photographs during the service.

44 We are an *economy* hotel, they kept saying, we do not *know* such people.

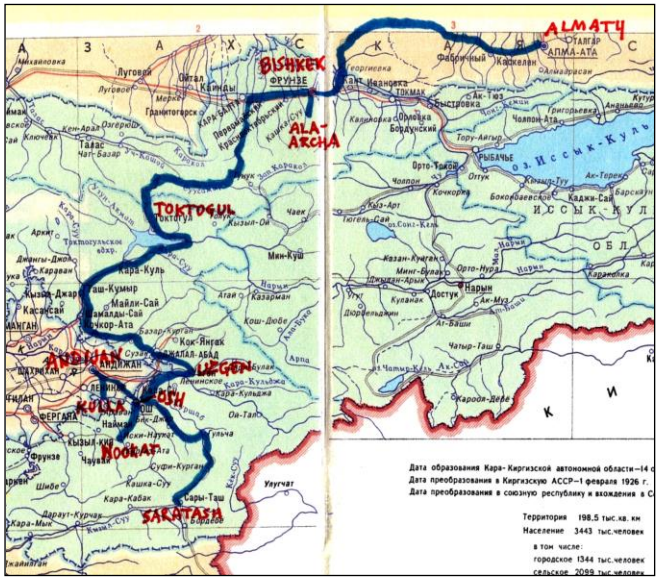
to stay in my air-conditioned hotel room, eat roasted chicken, and finish *Moby Dick*. So that is what I did.[45]

And then the taxi came at 3:45 AM to take me to the airport.[46] We drove in silence through the deserted streets, and then I flew more than halfway around the world – 13 time zones – across the salty, sandy, rocky, sun-baked wastes of western Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus and the Black Sea, and then across all of Europe from Istanbul to Ireland, and then across the Atlantic Ocean and all of North America, back to my cool moist foggy seaside home in Californistan.

David

September 2013

WHERE IS KYRGYZSTAN?



MY JOURNEY IN CENTRAL ASIA

45 "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee."

46 Thank God, Almaty, I'm free at last!