

ALTO's Roadshow to Kazakhstan

By Steven Cutler



ALTO's first ever Roadshow, held last May in Almaty, the commercial centre of Kazakhstan, and its capital Astana, introduced members from all over the globe to one of the world's most rapidly growing new markets for language travel.



Photo courtesy of Thomas Areton, Cultural Homestay International

In addition to presenting ALTO members with a first-hand experience of this beautiful and dynamic country, and demonstrating its potential as an important source market for student travellers, the Roadshow—held in conjunction with a2's student fair—proved to be an effective venue for networking. In part, this was due to the large turnout. "I was impressed by the number of competitors and students who came for the fair," says Olga Demina, Marketing Director of Vancouver English Centre.

But a more important factor, perhaps, was the easy, collegial environment the Roadshow provided. According to ALTO Chairman Mauro Biondi, "Kazakh agents were able to get to know representatives from the different schools in a familiar, cordial atmosphere."

"Meeting our partners face-to-face is the right way to do business," says Tom Areton, Co-Director of Cultural Homestay International, a non-profit educational exchange programme. "Showing them the fair, our booth and our materials made them feel more trusting."

Plus, he adds, "seeing excited Kazakh youngsters mob our booth warmed our hearts. They all want to study in America!"

Many new partnerships could result from the show. "We are signing a contract with ILAC Canada," says Laura Jakitova, Marketing Director of LLP Fattah Travel, a recruitment agency based in Almaty. "And we are planning to make an appointment to meet with the Emerald Cultural Institute, Ireland." Biondi opened a day of presentations from member schools and individual meetings with language travel agencies with a slideshow about ALTO. The presentation included a talk about ALTO's mission and the value for Kazakh agents of partnering with its members.

"The percentage of Kazakh students studying abroad has tripled over the past few years," Biondi told the group. "There is a need for quality partnerships so that outbound students receive the best 'in-country' language experience."

Kazakhstan is affected by the economic downturn along with the rest of the world, of course. "People are not hurrying to spend their money," observed Zhanbulat Toimanov, Director of Capital Education, a Kazakh agency. However, said Biondi in an interview after the Roadshow, "its vibrant culture and rich natural resources will ensure its future growth." Plus, adds Biondi, "as a developing country, education is very important in Kazakhstan." Indeed, the government supports student travel with scholarships such as the Boloshak

scholarship programme of the Ministry of Education, presided on by its President, Bektursyn Kaldayev. The scholarship has helped thousands of students study abroad.

According to Jakitova, "Kazakh students are primarily interested in short and long-term holiday English Language programmes and academic programmes at all levels, including pre-university, degree, and post-graduate."

Many ALTO members were surprised by what they saw of Kazakhstan.

"How this country has developed!" says Vancouver English Centre's Marketing Director Demina, for whom this was the second visit. "It has so many new high-tech buildings now. And there is a common attitude and intent to study and focus on education."

"We want to be there," she concludes.

Market Profile

Kazakhstan Snapshot:

Government: Republic
 Population: 17 million
 Capital city: Astana (pop 1.2 million)
 Languages: Kazakh, Russian
 People: 46% Kazakh, 34.7% Russian, 4.9% Ukrainian

Religion: 47% Muslim, 44% Russian Orthodox, 2% Protestant

The world's ninth largest country, equivalent in size to all of Western Europe, Kazakhstan shares borders with China and Russia, from which it declared its independence in 1991.

Since independence, Kazakhstan's international prestige has grown, and its economy even more so, at a rate of almost 10 percent a year, in large part due to crude oil and natural gas production. It will likely become the world's leading exporter of uranium by 2010. In 2000, it was the first former Soviet republic to pay off all of its debt to the International Monetary Fund, seven years ahead of schedule.

Almaty is Kazakhstan's most cosmopolitan city and one of the most expensive in Central Asia. The modern city, replete with shops, restaurants, hotels and casinos, is the country's international marketplace.

Education in Kazakhstan is universal and mandatory through the secondary level and the adult literacy rate is 99.5 percent. The Ministry of Education's Bolashak scholarship, instituted in 1993, grants some 3,000 young students a year the opportunity to travel to 32 countries to attend 630 universities.

The number of Kazakh students studying abroad has tripled in the past three years. Nearly 4,000 travelled to England alone last year for study.