

# Hunting Potters. in Kazakhstan

**Jane Gibson reports**

We were once again in Central Asia on the Silk Road. A small group of potters, some regulars and some new. Beautifully organised by Gulnora Khurramova and ably led by two local guides Diana and Rustem.

Kazakhstan is a huge and prosperous country with many natural resources. The cities we visited were modern and clean with wide tree-lined streets and parks. The countryside has huge national parks accessed by permit. There, the flowers were astonishing, but the centre of the country is semi- desert. We travelled east from Almaty, (formally Alma-Ata, capital city until 1972) to the Chinese border seeing the deep Charyn Canyon on the way to the high lakes in the Tien Shan Mountains where Uighur peoples live on both sides of the border. Then south by train to Taraz and eventually West to Turkistan taking in mountains, canyons, waterfalls, petroglyphs and endless steppe where cattle, sheep, goats, horses and camels roam. Although our objective was to see pots and potters, both heritage and contemporary, we enjoyed 4x4 drives and walking to savour culture and countryside.

Slotted between the travel were archaeological sites, museums and craft studios where we learned the culture and history of Kazakhstan. The museums were full of pots, both earthenware and glazed. The Central State Museum had an especially fine collection including porcelain with a model of a traditional kiln. These pots had come from various archaeological digs from Bronze Age upwards. Many of the towns had huge replica pots as street decoration, so we knew pottery had been important.



Above: Pots at Almaty Craft Centre. Top shelf from Turkistan. Bottom shelf, pots made and fired with milk in the Craft Centre.



Left: Pottery at Almaty Craft Centre

On our first day we visited a brand-new Craft Centre, “Qazaq-Oner”, outside Almaty where the owner, Aigul Zhanserikova, showed us around. The project is to educate the younger generation in traditional Kazakh crafts such as felting, jewellery and pottery. There was a resident young potter who was making pots in the old tradition. He gave us a demonstration of throwing and explained about how the clay was sealed by firing in milk.

Our group had seen this technique in Russia on an earlier expedition. He said the local clay came from the East of the country but was rather poor and he preferred the clay from Uzbekistan. Both clays were low firing at 1110c. In the shop was an interesting water pot with a little head on it for a spout so I asked where we could see it being made. We were rather taken aback when told that there were very few traditional potters now and certainly none making on a large scale. During soviet times potters had to work in the cotton fields rather than pursue their craft, so it died out and never recovered. She said a few artists were just trying to keep the tradition alive and that this pot came from Turkistan.

As I collect water pots and we were finishing in Turkistan I was hopeful that we would find the potter. I had also seen this style in one of the museums so knew it was traditional. Curiously, on our way back from viewing petroglyphs we stopped at a small family museum with some craft workshops for leather making and metal work. There was a potter working nearby but he was unwell. In their small shop I saw the same waterpot with the sculptured head so asked if the potter made it. No, made in Turkistan was again the answer. However, I decided to buy it just in case I never found this potter. We also visited a couple of artists who were also potters and taught on a small scale.



Pots being sold at Craft Centre from Turkistan



Water pot in a museum

We took the train southeast to the ancient Silk Road City of Taraz where we visited a huge archaeological site of the medieval citadel. This archaeological park was created in 2011 when a four acre dig revealed 40,000 artefacts from the 1st-19th centuries. There was evidence of a caravanserai, examples of pottery water pipes, pots of course, public baths with a Roman style hypocaust and a Zoroastrian flame shrine. Near the site was a suburb museum where the artefacts were shown plus other public buildings all built in the 15th to 17th century style with beautiful tiles similar to those of Registan Square in Samarkand. There was a replica of the city gate, beautiful gardens, mogul style water channels, water wheel with revolving pots and a clock tower which was illuminated in the evening. Sadly, it was rather empty in contrast to the bustling modern shopping mall nearby.



Kedebay Karabdalov

We stayed for two days in a guest house on the edge of a National Park sampling village life. The guide Rustem took us to his village where we had a typical Kazak lunch. He was now interested in our pottery search and took us to the nearby river Aryn where the local clay was previously collected for bricks and pottery. Next was the modern city of Shymkent where we visited Gallery House where all kinds of crafts were being taught. We watched felt making, weaving, leather work, painting and some hand-building pottery. In the gallery shop were more of the water pots with intriguing spouts. Once more we were told they were made in Turkistan.



Traditional Kiln at Otrar



Traditional Kick wheel at Otrar



Abay Rysbayer





Pots by Abay Rysbayer

On route to Turkistan we visited the massive ruins of the Silk Road city of Otrar. Founded before the 8th century it was destroyed in 1218 by Genghis Khan. It rose again but with the decline of that trading route and non-stop feuding it had declined by the 18th century. The huge walls of the fortress town built with unfired bricks remain with a restored gate house over a moat. It was an advanced town and one can see remains of many houses, bath houses with hot water systems and a pottery. Here we saw a traditional kick wheel and wood-fired kiln. All the potters we had seen now used electric kilns and wheels but in Uzbekistan they still use the traditional methods. Otrar had been the centre of ceramic production of central Asia as we had been told. Turkistan, a huge modern city built next to the massive mausoleum complex of Arystan, a centre of pilgrimage, was our final stop. Here was a modern caravanserai in a Disneyland style with light shows. Extraordinary.

We were due to leave the next morning but undaunted I asked our guide if he could phone the Gallery owner in Shymkent to find out where he had obtained those water pots. Success. Abay Rysbayer, whose beautiful water pots we had seen on day one and several times since was not referenced in our guide information. He demonstrated his throwing and showed us moulds for larger pots. His pots were mainly thrown with the additions hand moulded. He had a small electric kiln and similar to the other potters we had met he used a mixture of local and Uzbekistan clays with added grog and flower seeds. He also made replacement tiles for the mausoleum using old glaze recipes. At last we had met the anonymous potter.



Replacement tile for mausoleum by Abay Rysbayer.

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