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From Russia with love



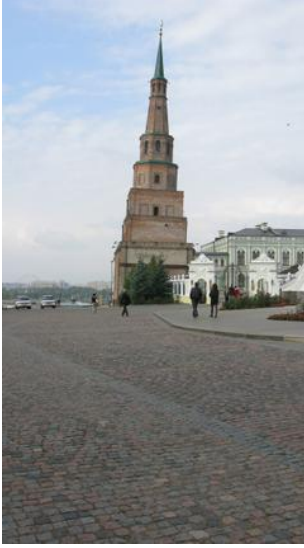
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Horse carriage at Kremlin Photo: Deepa Alexander



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Soyembika Tower Photo: Deepa Alexander



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Kul Sharif Mosque at the Kremlin Photo: Deepa Alexander



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Spasskaya Tower Photo: Deepa Alexander



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Mural on walls of the leather factory Photo: Deepa Alexander



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Matryoshka dolls Photo: Deepa Alexander

In a thousand-year-old city in Tatarstan, Deepa Alexander finds that the twain does meet sometimes

The ghosts of Mongol warriors ride with me as I fly over the windswept steppes of Central Asia. Summer's exuberance is fast fading and stacked clouds flush in the last light of day, as the flight from Almaty heads north to Kazan. Genghis Khan, Taimur... their legendary names follow me as I arrive on a balmy evening in a city framed by pearls of mist.

Home to about a million people (Tatars and Russians in equal proportions and many other minorities) Kazan is Russia's third capital and its foremost sports city (it hosted the 2013 Universiade and will host the 2015 World Aquatics Championships and 2018 FIFA World Cup). Located about 750 km east of Moscow, where the Volga and Kazanka rivers meet, it was once the radiant jewel in a string of cities along the Great Volga and Northern Fur Routes, a remote hub in the immensity of the Russian taiga that excited the imagination of Khans and Tsars alike. A primary centre of the Kazan Khanate since the 9th century till its conquest by Ivan the Terrible in 1552, the city carefully preserves its Islamic roots and Russian Orthodox influences making spiritual harmony its post-Soviet brand.

The light is meridional when I step out of the Kazan Grand Hotel in the heart of the city and head to the old Tatar settlement in the company of our guide Zulfiya Ahmadullina. Dressed in a blouse with ruffles, long skirt, a head scarf, colourful boots (ichigi) and exquisitely carved silver jewellery, Zulfiya wears her Tatar heritage on her sleeve.

She leads us to Nasyri Street and tells the story of the Turkic Muslims who migrated here from the steppes and made it their home. Boxes of impatiens strung on streetlamps add a dash of cheer and a group of friendly old women sun themselves on the benches outside the Marjani Mosque, the oldest in Tatarstan.

Inside the soft carpeted halls, I tiptoe past men in tubeteikas (round caps) whispering prayers. Named after Imam Marjani, the head of the first Muslim parish in the 18th century, it was the only mosque in Kazan to escape closure during the Soviet years.

The nearby Apanaev Mosque, named after the merchants who maintained it, also showcases Russian baroque and Tatar architecture. The street is flanked by pastel-coloured wooden houses with gingerbread trim windows that give it the air of a stage set. A mural of leatherworkers of the last century comes alive on the brick walls of a workshop whose massive gates open to a square with musical fountains overlooking Kaban Lake. Grandparents wheel children in prams and the Route No 6 bus trundles past, painted with roses and gifted to the city by a Muscovite who found the love of his life on it.

Kazan has 44 universities all located in picturesque buildings with parks and promenades. I pass the bakery where writer-activist Maxim Gorky once worked; the grand façade of Kazan Federal University, which counts among its galaxy of alumni, the novelist Leo Tolstoy and revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, later expelled for his anti-Tsarist stance. Lenin's statue, however, lords it over

Liberty Square. Opposite stands the Musa Jalil Theatre of Opera and Ballet where celebrated Tatar dancer Rudolf Nureyev once performed.

After lunch, I head for the ancient walled heart of Kazan — the Kremlin (citadel) raised by Ivan the Terrible on the ruins of the castle of the Khans and now a world heritage site. Children clamber up the statue of poet Musa Jalil as I head for Spasskaya Tower, a proud sentinel and only remnant of a monastery destroyed during the Stalin era. The gold-plated star that crowns it glints in the late afternoon sun. The Kremlin has a historic significance accentuated by its wild baroque extravagance. Inside its winged battlements is a place rich with monasteries, myths and musings. Horse-drawn carriages make their way through cobbled streets past the 16th century Annunciation Cathedral with its ornate gilt altar and onion domes. Newly-weds pose for pictures under the blue minarets of the Kul Sharif mosque, one of the largest in Europe and with a rich atrium whose gold leaf embellishments are as beautiful as a Faberge egg.

I slip in and out of souvenir stores collecting hordes of magnets and matryoshka dolls till I find the leaning Soyembika Tower. Under it are the wrought-iron gates that lead to the President's residence. I kneel in front of the icon of Our Lady of Kazan at the nearby Bogoroditsky Monastery. Further, where the Siberian Gates once stood, is the Church of St. Barbara. The last stop for dissidents banished to the Gulag, this was where they prayed and exchanged their shoes for chains.

It's dusk as I walk through the pedestrian-only Bauman Street with its smattering of bars, tea rooms, the beautifully-lit bell tower of Epiphany Church, and the imposing statue of opera singer Fyodor Shalyapin.

Back at the hotel, I step out to the balcony to take in a bird's eye view of Kazan twinkling below. I see a city where East is West, where two rivers mix, two cultures collide, two religions meet and many worlds come together.

(The writer was in Russia at the invitation of Ministry of Youth Affairs, Sports and Tourism, Republic of Tatarstan)

How to get there

There are flights out of all four metros. However one of the shortest routes is to fly from New Delhi to Kazan via Almaty.

Must do

* Buy matryoshka dolls. The beautiful hand-painted ones feature the classic Russian woman dressed in a sarafan, a long peasant dress. There are also ones featuring Putin, Stalin and Obama for those who's taste runs to the quirky.

* Have your picture taken inside the bronze replica of the carriage of Empress Catherine II on Bauman Street.

* Attend a cultural programme and participate in fun games at the Tatar Kalyapush Centre.

Must eat

* Chak chak - golden dough balls baked in honey.

* Tokmach - a clear soup made from thin homemade noodles and chicken stock.

* Echpochmack - Triangular pies with delicious potato and meat fillings.