



Kazakhstan's futuristic capital, Astana, feels like a city designed to impress. Built largely in the past 30 years, it rises out of the steppe with bold modern architecture, gleaming towers, and wide boulevards. While it lacks the centuries-old history of some capitals, Astana more than makes up for it with its ambitious skyline, cultural institutions, and unique blend of Kazakh tradition and 21st-century design. In addition to providing opportunities to explore Kazakhstan during your free time, many of the places below may also provide useful starting points for research, visits, or fieldwork connected with your ILEx Project. Some of the must-see attractions in Astana include:

1. **Bayterek Tower:** Perhaps the most recognizable symbol of Astana, this 97-meter tower represents a mythical tree of life with a golden egg at its top. Visitors can ride the elevator to the viewing deck inside the golden sphere, which offers sweeping views across the city. There's also a bronze handprint of the country's first president, where people traditionally place their hand for good luck. The tower is especially striking when lit up at night. 
2. **Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center:** Designed by Norman Foster, this giant transparent tent is one of the most unique buildings in the world. Inside, you'll find a vast shopping mall, restaurants, cinemas, and even an indoor beach with sand imported from the Maldives. It's both a local hangout and a modern architectural wonder, showing off the city's futuristic side.
3. **Hazrat Sultan Mosque:** This impressive white-marble mosque, with its turquoise domes and four minarets, can accommodate up to 10,000 worshippers. Visitors are welcome outside of prayer times, and the interior's soaring ceilings and delicate calligraphy are breathtaking. Dress modestly when entering, as it is an active place of worship. 
4. **Palace of Peace and Reconciliation:** Another Norman Foster creation, this glass-and-steel pyramid was built to host the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Inside, there are exhibition halls and meeting spaces, while the upper level offers great views of the city. The building symbolizes Kazakhstan's commitment to interfaith dialogue and peace.

5. **Astana Opera House:** A neoclassical gem, the opera house is one of the largest in Central Asia and stages world-class performances of opera, ballet, and concerts. Even if you don't attend a show, the interior is worth seeing, with its marble halls and ornate chandeliers. For students of Russian, attending a performance also offers an enjoyable opportunity to experience the language in a cultural setting outside the classroom.



6. **National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan:** A vast, modern museum that tells the story of Kazakhstan's past and present. Exhibits range from prehistoric artifacts to displays on nomadic culture and Kazakhstan's road to independence. The scale of the museum is impressive, and it's one of the best places to understand the country's identity.

7. **Nur Alem Pavilion (EXPO 2017 Sphere):** Originally built as the Nur Alem Pavilion for EXPO 2017, Astana's enormous glass sphere has been transformed into Alem.AI, an international centre for artificial intelligence. The eight-storey building brings together education, research, technology and innovation, while the spectacular sphere itself remains one of the most recognisable landmarks on Astana's skyline.



8. **Ishim River Promenade:** Running through the heart of the city, the Ishim River is lined with walking paths, cafés, and parks. In summer, locals enjoy boat rides and riverside cafés; in winter, the frozen river and surrounding areas become a focus for winter activities. It's a good place to feel the rhythm of everyday life.
9. **Independence Square and Kazakh Eli Monument:** This vast open space is framed by monumental buildings and a soaring column topped with a golden eagle. The square is often used for national celebrations and parades, and nearby you'll find the Palace of Independence and the Hazrat Sultan Mosque.

Environs of Astana

10. **Burabay National Park:** Often called the "Kazakh Switzerland," Burabay is about a 2.5-hour drive from Astana and offers pine forests, rocky outcrops, and crystal-clear lakes. Popular for hiking, boating, and picnics, it's a refreshing escape from the modern cityscape. Legends of Kazakh heroes are tied to the area, adding a cultural layer to the natural beauty.



11. **Korgalzhyn Nature Reserve:** Located approximately 130 km southwest of Astana, Korgalzhyn is an internationally important wetland and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve, famous for its extraordinary birdlife, including its population of pink flamingos. Part of the reserve also forms part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site Saryarka – Steppe and Lakes of Northern Kazakhstan. It is an excellent destination for birdwatchers and anyone interested in Kazakhstan's unique steppe ecosystem.

Other Cities in Kazakhstan

12. **Almaty:** The former capital and still the country's cultural hub, Almaty sits at the foot of the Tian Shan mountains. With leafy boulevards, ski resorts nearby, and attractions like the Green Bazaar and Kok-Tobe Hill, it offers a striking contrast to Astana's modernism. A short flight away, Almaty is ideal for those who want a more traditional urban experience with easy access to mountains and nature.



13. **Karaganda:** About three hours south of Astana, Karaganda is known for its mining history and memorials to Soviet labor camps. It's a city of contrasts — industrial heritage alongside cultural institutions like the Karaganda State Theatre. A sobering but important destination for understanding Kazakhstan's Soviet past.

Weekend or Reading Week Trips

14. **Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan:** A one-hour flight or longer overland trip brings you to Bishkek, the Kyrgyz capital. Known for its leafy parks, Soviet architecture, and proximity to the Ala-Too mountains, Bishkek is laid-back and welcoming. It's an excellent base for short treks and mountain adventures.

15. **Uzbekistan (Tashkent or Samarkand):** A short flight south takes you into Uzbekistan, where Islamic architecture and Silk Road history await. Tashkent combines Soviet modernity with Central Asian culture, while Samarkand dazzles with its turquoise-domed mosques and madrassas. Both are ideal weekend trips for history lovers.

