

The Further Adventures of Rijumati – part III

Rijumati has the past six months travelling around the world, leaving his home city of Cambridge UK shortly after Xmas 2007. This is part III of his adventures... Parts I and II have also been published in FWBO News.



19th May 2008

Dear Friends,

I once wrote to some of you from the Polish city of Plock [pronounced *Pwotsk*], but in the quest for even more outlandish-named places to visit, and through a strange set of circumstances, I now am on my way to Kyrgyzstan which is probably the most unpronounceable sovereign state in the world. Try saying *Keer-gish-stan* but with a strong "zzz" at the end of the "gish." I hear you asking "How on earth have you ended up there Rijumati?"



Janaka and I were waiting for 3-4 weeks to find out whether the Chinese would open the Tibet border to foreigners after the troubles there. In the meantime we went to Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim including the monastery trek of my last letter, and onto Kathmandu. There we found that we still hadn't got a clear answer so we went up to the Buddhist nunnery of Nagi Gompa, where we did a short retreat and joined in with the simple routines of nunnery life. Whilst there I walked to Shivapuri peak above the nunnery and met some western monks who were doing a retreat up there, including a hardy young Finn called Ananda who was living rough in a cave. Our retreat was a lovely and refreshing episode - and *no* we didn't wear the habit!

Finally in early May we got confirmation of the cancellation so I sent you all a short letter saying that I was flying to Chengdu in Sichuan, basically skipping over inaccessible Tibet and continuing on with my journey east. However I got an unpleasant surprise at the Chinese embassy in Kathmandu. The rules for visas had been changed mid-April in a kind of Olympic Torch knee-jerk paranoia, and it was not possible for me to get a visa to anywhere in China. The embassy staff told me that no visa would be issued without me first returning to the UK (and there were several other major hurdles like booking all the hotels and onward travel in advance). Perhaps Hong Kong would be an easier place to apply, but it is a long way from Kathmandu by land or sea and there were no guarantees I would fare any better there. The message from the Chinese officials was clear, "we don't want travellers like you roaming around China this year!"

Well that rather blew a hole in my plans for travelling to Japan by land and sea! Add to this the fact that Kathmandu is not really at good starting point for any land journey other than Tibet and basically I was stranded high, though not dry, since there were some tremendous thunderstorms in Kathmandu. As the last couple of weeks ticked away on my Indian visa I realised that I needed to go back to India and try to arrange another route. In hindsight a bizarre twist of fate prevented me from being in Sichuan very near to the epicentre when the devastating earthquake hit. I would have been on my way to Dhartsendo, birthplace of DharDO Rimpoche, to do some research for Suvajra and passing through the region of maximum destruction. Since my intention to go to Sichuan was very strong it took the visa refusal of the Chinese embassy to stop me. It is hard not to be awed by this providential refusal. It is quite possible that I would have been numbered amongst the 50,000 mortalities, or the 200,000 injured.

In the meantime Janaka had decided that to make the most of his remaining time he would visit Pokhara (in a last attempt to see the elusive Himalayan peaks) and the two Buddhist holy sites that he hadn't yet visited Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace, and Kusinagra, where the Buddha died. So we travelled to Pokhara - where miraculously on the very morning we left for the plains once more, the majestic peaks of the Annapurna range appeared in all their awesome glory.

Pokhara is Nepal's great pleasure city, packed with restaurants, clubs, hotels and expectant touts. It is a little god-realm, tucked away beside the lake, forest and great peaks like Machapuchare, Manalasu and Daulagiri - all over 7000m. As I got off the bus (Janaka had arrived a day earlier) the hotel touts were almost on me before the last step. "Like a pack of dogs onto a piece of meat," I and a young English couple were mobbed by men wanting to take us to their hotel in a "free" taxi ride. It was one of the most unpleasant arrivals anywhere on my travels,

rivalling the rickshaw mob outside Gaya station in Bihar. Despite strong and repeated rejections one of them even got into the front seat of the paid-taxi that I procured and futilely tried to divert me from going to meet Janaka at the hotel he was staying in! He seemed utterly put out when I finally managed to communicate to him that there was no way I was going to his hotel. These guys were desperate, it was a pitiful sight, and totally off-putting. So although Pokhara is beautiful placed I didn't like it much. Everything is designed to maximize the money you spend, every "hello sir" another attempt to draw in your spending power. And since neither Janaka or I are much good at clubbing - actually I've never seen Janaka at a nightclub so I'm making some assumptions here - I felt we were a bit like fish out of water. We didn't stay long, just long enough to be awed by those mighty peaks!



Lumbini is another thing altogether. I feel tremendously grateful for what the Nepalis have done there, building a beautiful park with temples from most of the major Buddhist sects, a forest, lake and nature reserve. All these are enclosed in a large parkland, maybe 5km square. The site as a whole was designed by Japanese architect Kenzo Tange, who designed the Hiroshima Ground Zero site. The Sacred Garden, where one finds Ashoka's pillar marking the exact birthplace of the Buddha, is a delightful and gentle place to sit and contemplate the significance of the Buddha's life. It is also a place where Mayadevi, his mother, feels very present. As Janaka and I chanted devotional verses together there, sheltering from the punishing heat beneath the trees, I felt joyful and deeply moved... how many lives have been touched by the teachings of the Buddha. How much poorer a world it would be had he not been born!

But Lumbini is still a long way from Kyrgyzstan! To get from India to Japan by land and sea **without** passing through China is a little difficult; one either has to go north or south of China. The southern route is tricky because no land passage is possible through Burma and there are a lot of boats to be taken to make up the stages of the journey, for instance Singapore – Hong Kong – Taiwan – Philippines – Japan. Also the southern route is very well trodden, so I was attracted to the northern route. The northern route is via northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and the Vladivostok-Toyama ferry. What a lot of *-stans!*

Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan are all very troubled and dangerous places, especially for an English, half-Jewish Buddhist! So I've decided to compromise my no-flying rule to hop over these states and start the onward journey from Kyrgyzstan, which is reportedly outstandingly beautiful. Bordering China with the Tian-Shan Mountains and on the old Silk Road, Kyrgyzstan has a long and history of travellers, pilgrims and invaders passing through. I hope to spend some time by one of the world's highest lakes, Issyk-Kul and do a little walking in the valleys of the Tian-Shan before working my way northwards through Kazakhstan.

Another reason for choosing the northern route is to see Lake Baikal, where I have a family connection, and the chance to visit the predominantly Buddhist republic of Buryatia, which has apparently seen a resurgence of Mongolian-style Buddhism since the break up of the USSR. The family story goes that my great great grandfather Wolicki (pronounced *Vol-its-ski*) took part in the abortive Polish uprising of 1863 (Poland then being subsumed into Russia) and was sent as a prisoner to Siberia, somewhere near Irkutsk on Lake Baikal. His sons grew up there and one of them, my great grandfather, was an engineer working on the building of the Trans-Siberian railway. Eventually the Wolickis moved back to Poland, but perhaps I still have some distant relatives out in Siberia! Even just seeing the worlds largest lake, Baikal (containing 20% of the worlds unfrozen fresh water), would be a good enough reason to visit – but add the other factors and I just knew this was the route for me!

So I'm in Delhi and having escaped the dismal budget accommodation of Pahar Ganj, am staying with a lovely Sikh family, the Singhs, who are friends of my family. I've got the visas, have booked the flight and will be on my way this Wednesday. I expect that mobile communications will be very basic in Kyrgyzstan, but my next update should have the flavour of Central Asia. I hope this isn't too meaty a flavour since Central Asia's carnivorous habits are apparently very tough on vegetarians!

Lots of love, Rijumati

10th June 2008

Dear Friends,

Here are three short pieces that I wrote whilst in Kazakhstan awaiting my Russian visa. They give three very different impressions of life here, but all in some way relevant to knowing how the Russian and Kazakh character has been shaped by natural and cultural influences.

The Russian visa that was impossible in Bishkek is easy in Almaty, once you are prepared to pay the large fees of the agent recommended by the Russian consul. One can't help but suspect some petty corruption in the \$210 needed to get it! I expect to be in Irkutsk, close to Lake Baikal, by 18th June. From there I will plan to spend some time exploring the lakelands and then go to Buryatia where I have a contact with some of the local Buddhists. My visa means that I can spend up to a month in Russia, so I've conceived the crazy idea of taking the northern BAM railway to Vanino and catching the ferry to Sakhalin Island, from which it is a very short ferry to Hokkaido - the most northerly of Japan's islands. Something about arriving in the "Japanese highlands" and working my way south, rather than arriving in one of the major ports really appeals to me. Love Rijumati of Almaty

Registration

Every foreigner entering Kazakhstan or Russia needs to register with the police within 5 days of entry or face who knows what nightmare redtape and fines when trying to leave the country.

I went to the infamous OVIR office apparently much hated by locals and foreigners alike, now renamed "Immigration Police." My friend Marat had warned me what to look for in Cyrillic letters, both to find the right building and the right window at which to wait. Without this invaluable information the ordeal would have been even more confusing. "Arrive early," Marat warned me, "and don't be put off by the queues, they move quite fast." Window #3 was just one of a dozen or so windows catering for all manner of registrations and official business.

Most windows open for business at 10am and work for several hours, a huge improvement from the old days when they opened at 11am and worked for two hours - woe betide those getting too far down the queue! By 9.20am there was already a sizeable queue milling around each window. Having no idea how the system worked I just parked myself as close as I could to window #3 and hoped for the best. The Russian speakers all around me seemed to register my presence and fix my order in the queue, for which I was immensely grateful - at least someone had noticed that I existed! Obviously after years of bureaucratic endurance a sense of queue fairness has developed amongst ordinary people. Without this human recognition it would be easy to feel utterly lost in this soulless official building, not knowing what was going on or how to progress from one bureaucratic stage to the next. The people around me were patient, but with an air of frustration; I guess it is just a way of life that one has to spend "wasted" hours trying to get simple things done. Though these days those who can afford it pay big bucks and avoid the queue.

As the time got closer to 10am there was a palpable change in mood, a kind of jostling for position. We were like caged animals trying to sort out the pecking order. Several people appeared and claimed a prior place in the queue to me, who was I to know whether that was fair or not? When I gave way to one young woman, though I couldn't understand what she said, her smile communicated intense relief. Sometimes a small gift of one's energy can make for a real sense of human solidarity!

After about an hour I got to the front and presented my papers. Fortunately the friendly looking Kazakh woman spoke English, unfortunately she wouldn't accept my passport for registration. "You need to go to the cash window, pay 745KZT, and come back," she said as she handed my documents back. You know that heart sinking feeling when you feel that the bureaucrats have won and you are just back at square one again!

The cash window queue had a rather more dog eat dog atmosphere. It was longer since all the dozen registration windows were serviced by this one cash window. To make matters worse the sliding metal tray used for pushing documents and money back and forward was jammed forcing the cashier and her "clients" to squeeze everything through a small gap. Given the long queue, the palpable atmosphere of frustration, the broken tray and the slowness of her printer, the poor cashier was looking very hassled and the day had just started!

I waited for another hour, the queue seeming even more intangible than at window #3. A woman with a baby used her young charge as a passport to get straight to the front. A man shouting in Russian bypassed the usual

protocols, came to the window and managed to receive a piece of paper, he carried on shouting, to whom it was impossible to say, as he marched back to another queue somewhere else.

When I finally got to the front and asked for "registratsya" I got a blank from the cashier. She said something in Russian, but then just ignored me and started dealing with the man behind me. "Pazalsta, pa-anglisski?" (please, do you speak English?) got no response. "Can anyone tell me why she won't accept my payment?" I asked in English, but all around just blank frustrated looks. It is one of those moments when one sinks into despair - helplessly lost in a bureaucratic nightmare bouncing from one window to another! A slight sense of panic rose up in my mind, "I could be stuck here for days trying to get through the system!"

I went back to the window #3 and just went straight to the front, much to the dismay of several bystanders who demanded "why?" in Russian. The English speaking official was my lifeline, otherwise I was just drowning in the sea of impersonal systems. "She won't accept my payment, I don't know why" With a look of consternation from her I nonetheless received a paper with an official stamp detailing the payment I needed to make, my passport to freedom!

Again back at the cash desk I went straight to the front, but no one seemed to mind, I guess they could see from my manner that I was desperate (and had been waiting for 2 hours by now)! Without even a moment's eye contact the cashier took my chit through the broken cash tray, accepted the money and printed my receipt. As waves of relief washed over me I reflected that for all of us, bureaucrat and citizen, this was a kind of living hell. Trapped in a system designed to keep us under control but in such an inefficient way that hours of one's life just get eaten up.

I count myself lucky to have escaped the registration hells in just about 2 hours and with my sanity mostly intact. The experience easily creates a sense of desperation, "I don't know what I have to do so that they'll let me get out of here!" A Canadian man behind me was looking panicked, and I later discovered that it took him several more hours to get through.

Of course in the West we have lots of systems designed to keep us under control, but usually one doesn't notice that they're being employed. The security services just do their sinister work in the background. Here in the ex-Soviet republics the old habits of in-your-face control are still alive. What hardships the Russian peoples have endured!

Alone in the Tian Shan



Marat drove me into the Aksai National Park where I planned to walk through the gorge up to the glacier which is the source of the river - or at least as far as it is possible to walk in one day and get back. We picked up some young hitchhikers on the way, two scantily clad teenage girls and a young boy called Igor. They were also out for a day's hiking.

Marat dropped us at the furthest barrier and off we went, our improbable group of 4 hikers. Within a few minutes we met our first obstacle. A guy in a big 4WD informed my Kazakh friends that we couldn't go any further up the road since it was private land. I was rather appalled that we were in the middle of a National Park with only one road up the valley and we were denied entry. One wonders how many back-handers went into the private purchase of this public space! I decided that I would write to the Kazakh department of tourism and complain.



My young friends just decided to turn back and return to the lower valley - which is the abode of many Dachas and rather undramatic scenery. We parted cordially as I decided to climb back up to the Orthodox monastery on the ridge, where I had walked the previous day. The cobalt blue sky, brilliant greens and many flowers of the forest were delightful, mitigating my sense of being thwarted.

Once one climbs above 1600m the deciduous forest disappears and gives way to the dark green spruces. The climb to the monastery winds its way up makeshift wooden steps through the dim forest light, reminiscent of the abode of Baya Yaga

the great Russian witch. The monastery is hidden amongst the trees, the golden onion towers of the main chapel glinting magically in the sunlight. I didn't see my friend Brother Andrei whom I'd met the previous day, in fact the whole place seemed deserted. As one keeps climbing suddenly one emerges out of the forest to be greeted by the stunning vista of the snow-capped Tian Shan and the higher Aksai gorge.

I sat in the shade of the last spruces, contemplating this sublime view, when an elderly Father appeared as a speck in the distance, laboriously climbing up the path to the vegetable garden on the ridge. He wore the black full length habit and circular hat of the orthodox priest, and had a long grey beard. In the strong morning sunshine he must have been cooking in those robes. It took a full 10 minutes for him to reach the spot where I sat, he seemed to show no sign of having noticed me, but as I greeted him he smiled and kept on walking.

Gazing at the great peaks, the farther of which are snow covered, whilst the nearer are bare, I conceived the slightly crazy idea of climbing the nearest peak. I could just make out a path leading up the ridge in the right direction, "perhaps it will be possible to find a path along the ridge through the forest." Slightly crazy because I had no map, but the visibility was excellent and the ridge looked like an easy hike.

There was indeed a reasonably well trodden path up the ridge, passing through wonderful flowered alpine meadows and into yet more spruce forest. It was however a long way, perhaps 10km and steadily rising by about 800m. In the scorching midday sun and given the distance it was a steady effort and I was soon drenched with sweat. I began to be concerned that I wouldn't have enough water.

After 4 hours I reached the basin at the base of the main peak. Here I guessed from the semi-circular contours that I might find a water source. As I scrambled over the cyclopean granite boulders I heard the tantalising sounds of running water but buried too far down to reach. Over one side of the basin the rocks looked dark as if stained by water, and suddenly, eureka!, I saw a small brilliantly clear mountain brook. Perhaps no joy can really compare with that of a hot, thirsty man finding a cool clear mountain spring and drinking his fill. To the south mountain peaks, to the north falling away into the distance the endless expanse of the Steppe, all around meadows of vivid alpine flowers. It was almost like being in paradise, were it not for the presence of copious numbers of mosquitoes. The numbers of them defied my feeble attempts to fend them off, the only alternative to becoming a major feast seemed to be to keep moving, so it was a brief sojourn by my idyllic mountain stream.

The climb to the peak was arduous, scrambling 500m up a 50% slope of scree and grass. It took me nearly an hour, with frequent pauses, partly to rest the legs, but also to fortify the spirit, part of me doubting whether I could do it. There was a strange optical effect which meant I was unable to judge whether the rock towards which I was heading was very large and far away, or medium-sized and near. It seemed to get no closer as I struggled grabbing tufts of grass, dislodging loose boulders, stumbling over roots. My Buddhist mind training was an invaluable aid in the patience required - "just take a few more steps!" Suddenly, unexpectedly, I arrived at the summit, and wow! the view. The Aksai glacier, or what remains of it, was in plain view perhaps 10km away to the south east, trapped in a narrow valley. The next ridge of mountains were all white-capped, presumably over 4000m. The vista is beyond my feeble powers to describe adequately, fortunately digital photography can paint the picture.

I stayed on the summit for a long time, my soul drinking from the fountain of sublime inspiration. The only distractions from a sense of paradise were once again the swarms of mosquitoes and a vaguely queasy feeling in my belly, perhaps a mild version of altitude sickness which had been increasing as I ascended. In the end the bloodsuckers drove me to leave. Despite wearing my raincoat with the hood up in the full sunshine, and coating my clothes and skin in repellent, they seemed unperturbed. As the only animal anywhere to be seen I must have appeared like a free lunch!



And so I made a fateful decision. Rather than return by the path I'd come up I judged that the descent into the Aksai valley itself was none too steep and I could make it without an obvious path. The valley was a feast of meadows and flowers. With the pristine river running down from the snows and the gentle glacial contours it seemed like an entrance into a lost world.

As I zigzagged down the meadowed slopes I began to realize that the cloud of mosquitoes following me was growing into something like a swarm. Soon, looking back, they easily numbered thousands, all hungry for blood! I moved swiftly hoping either that the wind would get up and blow them away, or that the change in altitude would deter their pursuit. Thanks heavens for my Gore-Tex

raincoat, which like a second skin, provided some respite from the onslaught. The descent was rapid, but as I got lower it got steeper and I ended up in a narrow dried up stream bed, scrambling over the boulders, and trying to outrun the clouds of bloodsuckers. Somehow the absurdity of the situation brought out my sense of humour, though in reality it was a risky moment. A twisted ankle in such a place could be fatal, quite apart from the invitation to become a main meal!

When I finally got to the low meadows I relaxed and started walking steadily enough to keep the mosquitoes at bay. The meadows were virgin; tall waist-high grasses and flowers, wide open views of the U-shaped valley, the sound of the river crashing its way out of the heights. Of course there was another anxiety in these long grasses, I'd been warned about the prevalence of encephalitis bearing ticks in these mountains, and long grass would be their favourite habit. Fortunately I'd had the vaccination against encephalitis and tucked in my clothing to cover all exposed skin - paradise always has a shadow face!

However my deliverance was not yet assured, I faced another big challenge. There was no path to be seen in the entire valley and as I tracked the river down it began to become more and more precipitous as the Aksai cut its way through the granite. Soon I was out of the meadows and scrambling through the forest and eventually over boulders alarmingly close to the sheer drop over the river. It was 6pm, only two hours of light were left and I was making painfully slow progress through this series of obstacles. For the first time I began to think "I could be in real trouble here if I get caught in the mountain forest at night." There was one vivid moment as I grasped a root on a tiny ledge above the raging torrent when I thought perhaps I would slip and meet an untimely end. A sense of panic began to arise, but once again the Buddhist mind training came to my aid, as I brought to mind a mantra, a protective chant. The mind calmed and became focused in the moment.

"What do I need to do next?" The answer was clear, I don't know how, but it was crystal clear. "You've got to get across the river, this bank is too dangerous!" Easier said than done. I could conceivably have waded the river, but it was ice cold, waist-deep, and very fast flowing. My experience of wading much shallower rivers was that within 30 seconds the icy waters begin to make the feet numb and sap one's energy. What about leaping across from boulder to boulder. There were some places where the gap between the boulders was of the order of a 1-2m, and the river itself not wider than 10m, but with the boulders soaking wet it would be an athletic feat right at the limits of what my body is capable. As I slowly edged my way down-stream looking for a suitable crossing point I was astonished to see a footbridge! It is hard not to see a touch of divine providence in this appearance. There was no path on my side of the river, the bridge was obviously in poor repair, almost all the slats had rotted just leaving a metal frame. The entry points to the bridge on both banks were enmeshed in brambles and branches, but the frame seemed solid. Clearly this was no longer a viable crossing for a footpath, but for me it was salvation. On the farther bank there was even the remains of a concrete staircase, now cracked and shattered by roots, up which I scrambled away from the torrent.

And so I emerged, somewhat chastened, into a broad meadow, at the end of which I could see two large white yurts, some horses and a track. I was home and relatively dry - just one boot had ended up in the river! Having said that it was still a good 5km just to get back to the National Park gate, and after a few knocks and stumbles my feet and knees were sore. As the meadow followed the curve of the gorge I suddenly caught a glimpse of Almaty in the distance and realised that my phone would work along the line of sight and I would be able to send a text to Marat saying that I was fine and could he meet me at the gate.

As I approached the yurts I looked for people but just set off the barking of the dogs. They were however relatively friendly barks, not the teeth-baring gnashing of so many guard dogs here. They certainly alerted anyone to my presence, but kept a reasonable distance, whether out of fear or respect I don't know. Suddenly I was hailed by a woman from a nearby copse. She, with her baby and husband were tending to some horses and foals, and with a big smile she invited me over. We proceeded to communicate sparingly, I managed to get across that I had been in the mountains and was going to Almaty, but the human warmth beyond the words was unmistakable.

The last obstacle was crossing the private land to get out of the valley. I suspected there would be dogs so I kept some stones in my pocket just in a case. I was not mistaken. Happily the large, vicious mastiffs in the bizarre, deserted ex-soviet holiday camp were chained up. Everywhere rather decayed wooden buildings were painted garishly with images of children playing. The scene of desolate swings and slides could have been straight out of a film by Tarkovsky. Lastly there was the farmhouse and its unchained, teeth-baring terriers; loud, aggressive and fearing; though not a serious threat they could have nipped my ankles bad enough. The lady of the farm did little to call them off as she managed to convey that this was private land and I shouldn't be there. I made apologetic noises and smiled, she smiled back and off I walked. Marat, bless him, was dozing in the car as I crossed the barrier - I could have hugged him - all 90kg of him. He said with great irony, "you lazy guy, couldn't you walk the

last 12.5km!" And so we returned just as the sun was setting, leaving me to rest my wearied limbs, and anoint my large collection of bites.

A visit to the Museum



The museums of Almaty are a rather bizarre collection, worthy of being museum pieces themselves. My favourite by far is the Geology museum which is accessed by a virtually indistinguishable door in the side of the huge Institute of Business Management building. My first attempt to find it was a total failure, since there is no indication that the said door is anything other than an entrance for the service staff. A few days later I tried again and ending up in the bureau of a bank, a rather helpful lady walked me to the correct door. As I entered the small room there were indeed miscellaneous lumps of rock, but one could hardly call it a museum! The elderly babushka smiled and started talking in very rapid Russian, none of which I could understand. I managed to ascertain that the entrance fee was 100 KZTenge (about 40p). One of the most attractive aspects of Almaty's museums is that they are unfailingly cheap! She then proceeded to lead me to the left-hand wall of her small vestibule which was entirely taken up by the sliding grate of large industrial lift - the sort that might taken a dozen miners down the pit. Whether this was a kind of symbolic gesture, or just the economies of the Soviet educational system, this functional, grindingly slow lift was indeed the entrance to an amazing subterranean gallery. As with the other two museums that I visited I was virtually the only visitor in evidence, some young students leaving as soon as I arrived. A rather glamorous young Kazakh women, attired in an elegant evening dress, welcomed me in perfect English. She turned out to be the resident geologist and curator - geology obviously has more style in Kazakhstan than one might imagine! I must say that it is the best display of rocks and minerals that I've ever seen, leaving both the Natural History Museum in London, and the Sedgwick Museum in Cambridge looking like dowdy maiden aunts in comparison. Perhaps to you the idea of visiting a room full of rocks seems about as interesting as watching paint dry, but let me explain what was so good about Almaty's geology museum. The displays were well lit with bright halogen lights, and since there was no natural light in this subterranean world, the sparkle of the rocks and crystals was dazzling. Each specimen was clearly labelled in Kazakh, Russian and English, with the colloquial and scientific names as well as the chemical composition - what a delight to realize that Amethyst is simply SiO_2 with a few impurities thrown in for colour! (The crystal lovers amongst you will no doubt be appalled at this utterly prosaic definition). I spent a happy hour working my way around the varied and intensely colourful collection - from malachite to quartz, from igneous to metamorphic. When I was just about finished, and wondering how to get the babushka to bring the lift down and let me escape, the elegant Kazakh geologist spontaneously appeared from some unnamed door and asked if I'd enjoyed the museum - to which I answered enthusiastically and I also picked her brains about some mineral that I'd never heard of. She seemed entirely unimpressed by my lack of knowledge saying "oh, that's Wiridium" as if it were just like knowing the name for coffee. As if by magic the lift descended, with the babushka still smiling, and she once again regaled me with her rapid Russian as she ushered me out, I just made appreciative noises and threw in one of my few Russian words: "karosha!" - "Good!"

The archaeology museum was as close to an anticlimax as it is possible to get. Once again even finding the right door was a challenge. After to-ing and fro-ing and directions from some Kazakh waitresses I found the entrance to what looked like a decaying council tenement. It turned out to be a faculty building for, I think, the economics department of Almaty University. However in the entrance space was a drab and unlit collection of broken bits of pottery - my least favourite of all museum artefacts is pottery, especially indistinguishable bits of broken pottery! Once again I was the only visitor, I tried to buy a ticket but the woman sitting in what could have been a ticket booth, or perhaps was just a very small office, refused to take any money from me. I wandered around in search of the main attraction that had led me there: a full size replica of Kazakhstan's greatest treasure - the 2200 year old Scythian golden burial suit called the "Golden Prince." However the only plinth that could have borne such a wonder was woefully bare, so it was just a question of trying to find some interest in the dingy view of broken pots. To be fair the lights did get switched on for a few minutes whilst I was looking around, but when I wandered into an adjacent room for a few minutes they'd been turned off again on my return.

The adjacent room seemed to be a corridor leading to various faculty offices, but there were brightly lit displays of various musical instruments and some Kazakh costumes as well as some glossy plans for an as yet unbuilt complex of some sort. Perhaps I had discovered the anthropology museum. Try as I might I couldn't really find much of interest there, and just as I was about to leave a man came up to me and demanded payment for visiting his corridor!

The State Museum is housed in a grand soviet era construction in it's own park. At least here was a building that looked like it should be a museum. The main doors lead into a large domed vestibule, with much natural light streaming through from high level. However as I entered the atmosphere was seemed rather dead and gloomy. Five or six curators and security men were sitting around looking deeply bored, and despite the large space I couldn't see any other visitors. When I bought a ticket the cashier, in rather broken English, informed me that only two galleries were open. I was suddenly beset by an urgent call of nature and went in search of the toilets. I was directed down into a dark basement, where one of the security men pointed me to an utterly pitch black space. "This is ridiculous" I thought as I tried to feel my way down the steps in the dark. I called back to the security for light, trying all the languages I could think of "lux, lumiere..." and he seemed to get the message. He "helpfully" lit a match and held it up, very slightly illuminating the marbled cubicles. "This isn't going to work!" I thought but fortunately as a seasoned budget traveller I carry my own torch. So I declined his matches and continued with my dark defecations providing my own illumination. I gathered that the museum had no electricity but they'd decided to remain open anyway - unthinkable for a Western museum: the health and safety inspectorate would have kittens just thinking of me using a public toilet in pitch darkness!

Upstairs the main gallery was dedicated to the (very short) history of the Kazakh Republic. Being one of the last ex-Soviet republics to declare independence the displays covered the years from 1991 to date. However it wasn't really a history so much as tribute to President Nazarbaev, the former Chairman of the Kazakh Communist party who managed to hold onto power after independence. The displays showed pictures of him posing for the camera with various world leaders, as well as graphs and statistics showing how well the country was doing.



The other gallery that was open had a mixture of Kazakh national costumes as well as a display of WWII paraphernalia including a German helmet, some old Russian artillery and a long list of the war dead. Contemplating the appalling loses of the Russian people, 20 million died between 1941 and 1945, a great sadness swept over me. To have sustained such loses and prevailed is indeed amazing, testament to the incredible resilience of the Russian people and the vast resources on which the nation can draw. The 1000s of years of Tartars and Slavs battling over the Steppe has bred some very hardy people.

Leaving the State Museum I felt strangely satisfied, in some sort of way I got what I came for. It didn't feel like I'd been to a museum, so much as received a lesson in "orthodox" politics, but that in itself tells one something about the forces that have shaped the national character!

To be continued...