

## Kazakh microcosm

Now that Almaty is no longer the capital of Kazakhstan - the government moved it to Astana in the north seven years ago, hoping to reduce the threat of a Chinese coup – the city's parks are not manicured so carefully as they once were. If anything this informality lends the heavily-polluted metropolis a bohemian air that sits well with its thriving population of painters and sculptors who have emerged from the former Soviet republic since Kazakhstan declared its independence in 1991. For me, whose experience of former communist countries has come almost exclusively via travels in Romania, the uniformly grey concrete architecture was almost comfortingly familiar. Superficial similarities vanished as soon as I entered my hosts' flat, where signs of Kazakhstan's fascinating and colourful past confronted me on every wall. It was a tiny living space for Marat, his wife, Akmaral and their son Timur, especially as the flat doubled as a studio for the couple who are both painters. With the Turkic peoples' legendary but still astonishing generosity, they let me stay with them for three days.

Kazakhstan covers the same area as continental Europe but has only 15 million people. Painters Marat Bekeyev and his wife, Akmaral, are part of a close-knit and go-ahead community of artists who are giving their country and its legends a new lease of life. Having burst onto the international scene in the early 1990s with such groups as the Green Triangle, and been supported by far-sighted Western collectors and the Soros Foundation, Saule Suleimanova and others among the fledgling country's most dynamic artists, have found an international clientele. Deservedly so, because from the paintings and sculptures that I saw on a three-day visit last June, their work is astonishingly good. Animal symbolism, horses, tribal memories and the true colours of the steppe play their part along with the hard truths of Kazakh daily life.