

In Search of Kazakhstan – The Land that Disappeared by Christopher Robbins.  
Profile Books 2008.

Christopher Robbins starts this enthralling, informative and hugely entertaining travelogue with an encounter on a plane and a tantalising piece of information – Apples are from Kazakhstan!

On that slender thread hangs a book which exudes the author's deep fascination with and huge attachment for the land of Kazakhstan and its peoples.

Like many other parts of the former Soviet Union, the history of Kazakhstan may be divided into three parts – pre-Communism, the Soviet Union, and post-Communism and the collapse of the Soviet Empire. The pre-communist period is extraordinary, particularly with regard to the legacy of successive invaders and rulers of a country the size of Western Europe. The Soviet epoch is predictably dark, a tale of the abuse and mass murder of Kazakhs by Russians, of pollution, the abuse of land and people, exile and displacement, the Gulag and nuclear weapons testing. The post-communist period is full of excitement, a little corruption, an explosion of enterprise and hope and a re-awakening of national identity.

Robbins writes beautifully, bringing to life the history, the land and the people, and providing an intriguing insight into the life and thought of the current President, a great survivor, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The best travel writing makes you want to visit the land about which you have read; I would defy anyone who finishes In Search of Kazakhstan not to want to go there and discover it for themselves; having finished the book I can understand only too well why Christopher Robbins fell in love with the place.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh