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## Nauryz Expo — March 21, 2011

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Nauryz, a celebration of the vernal equinox, is the one of the most important holidays in Kazakhstan. Shieli held its festivities this Sunday in our town square; it was a combined concert, feast, and exposition of all things Kazakh. And since it was such a large event, I didn't feel shy about taking my camera with me.

A long row of yurts appeared in the square on Saturday afternoon. Each village in our region erected its own yurt and hung its name above the entrance.



People wearing traditional Kazakh costumes could be seen milling about the square, passing in and out of the yurts. Like this prince:



...and this bride and groom. (My counterpart told me they were just wearing the costumes; they weren't actually getting married)...



...and their wedding party:



Some yurts had artisan items on display, like this handmade butter churn (on the left). I think the bigger one is used for making fermented milk, but, I'm not sure.



Young men and boys from a local school competed in short wrestling matches (*kures*)—a Nauryz tradition.



And, of course, just about every yurt had its own bottomless, steaming cauldron of Nauryz *kozhe*, the traditional holiday food. Nauryz *kozhe* is a hodgepodge; the only rule is that it must have at least seven different ingredients (mostly various grains, plus potatoes and a modest amount of meat), since the number seven brings luck and happiness.



Inside each yurt was a huge spread of traditional Kazakh foods, salads, and sweets. My counterpart and I slipped inside one of the yurts and sampled their *kozhe*. Here's the view from inside:



The fabrics hanging from the walls are covered in *oyu*, a traditional Kazakh pattern. The roof of the yurt is constructed of wooden poles, which slant upwards toward the central *shangyrak*:



For people who actually lived in yurts, the *shangyrak* functioned as a smoke hole. But as my Kazakh tutor told me, the *shangyrak* also was (and is) a powerful symbol of the home. Someone attending a housewarming party might say to their hosts, "May your *shangyrak* be high," which is like wishing that the hosts and their family will prosper in their new house.

The yurt, with its pretty tapestries and piles of soft fabric, made a very good impression on me. Had I known about them as a child, I might have built pillow yurts rather than pillow forts.

Here's a close-up of the *kozhe*. The little fry-breads to the right of my bowl are *bauyrsak*, another traditional food.



Finally, opposite the yurts, a few intrepid performers were warbling springtime songs into a relentless blast of wind.



In short, it was a day to remember — once you were back indoors and had drunk enough tea to chase off the windchill!

