

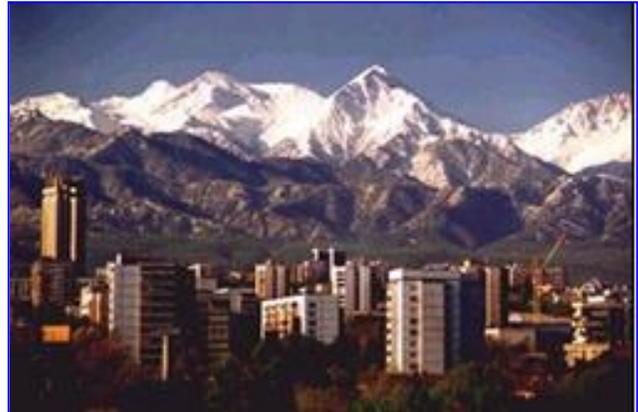
## Kazakhstan Ties—A View From the Inside Out

My name is Ian Anand Forber-Pratt and I was privileged enough to be a co-leader of the 2012 Kazakhstan Ties trip. I am an adoptee myself, and so connecting with the young people on the trip is a natural way for me to give back to this world. I hope that this recap will not be your typical. It will contain comments on life-changing moments, stories about eating in yurts and of course, pictures of us wearing silly hats.

So here we go... We started the trip at the Alma-Ata hotel in Almaty where we were greeted with breathtaking views of snowcapped mountains.

**As I looked out over the mountains on the day I arrived, I realized that their resilience and majesty were symbolic of the nature of our families. Though we all sometimes struggle to find our identity, together we can prevail and grow strong as a family.**

The struggle for identity is not exclusive to adoptees. It is a piece of us all and together, families on these trips triumph.



Although hot water was sometimes difficult to acquire, we enjoyed getting to know each other over outdoor breakfasts, bus rides and walks through the city. On the first day we saw a Wooden Russian Orthodox Church that is 177 ft and is the second tallest wooden building in the world, super cool if you ask me.



We then hiked up to the Medeo (in Kazah language it's Медеу) which is this ridiculously large skating rink that sits 1,691 meters above sea level, making it the highest skating rink in the world. The stairs were intense and after 30 sweaty minutes of climbing we were greeted with a beautiful view of the mountains. There was a giant eagle wearing a blindfold up there also, but that's another story...

After a couple days in Kazakhstan, the kids met for "Connect & Chat." it was amazing to hear them talk about their excitement, fears and expectations. It was comforting for all to know that they were not alone. Imagine that, just imagine, if your child or your family have felt like the adoption questions have been within your walls only, for years. Then imagine how it feels to finally open your eyes and truly know you are not alone. Everyone's experiences are different, but the families share one common bond—they are adoptive families who have roots in the country they are visiting. **The idea of family, at that moment, expands.**





We then visited an SOS village. For those of you not familiar with SOS villages, the concept is non-institutional care in a smaller home with a mother and a small number of children. We met some amazing people and enjoyed being children through a common denominators, soccer and food.

After touring Almaty the families left for their respective birth cities. On this trip one young lady met her birth mother and others met care takers and staff who remembered them fondly. They visited “baby houses” and hospitals and traced their roots. As you probably know, this is not the experience that everyone has. Even for me, when I return to my orphanage in India there is nothing to see. **But the power and healing comes from beginning to answer some of the unanswered questions; where am I from? What do people in my country do? Who should I identify with?** Many people on TIES trips leave the trip with a little less weight on their shoulders. They begin to put down the question marks they have been carrying.



After the respective trips we visited the city of Astana. It’s a futuristic city that the Jetsons or Michael Fox from “Back to the Future” may have imagined. We explored this epic city and enjoyed swimming in the river, riding rides in a space ship mall and celebrating birthdays.

In Astana we talked about the impact the trips to the birth cities had on each of us. Over a game of UNO the youth described joy, relief, jealousy and wonder about their trips. The siblings of the Kazakhstan adoptees compared their experiences and **everyone worked together to know that although their experiences all gave them strength and caused deep thinking; they knew that the trip would forever change their lives.**

During our city excursion many of the group decided to mark the trip with a picture that tributes the country. I can’t tell you why, but this picture makes me cry laughing every time. We tried to spell “Kazakhstan” and let’s just say, the ‘n’ was too much of an ‘end’ for me.



After our beautiful tribute to Kazakhstan, we packed for a two day trip to Burabay (Borovoe) National Nature Park. Although we spent time in nature and enjoyed seeing the beautiful lake, for many the highlights of the trip to Burabay were two fold: attending a mock-Olympic celebration at a local children's camp and eating a farewell dinner in a traditional yurt.



Although you may think that a mock – Olympic celebration is not a big deal, it was. The camp put on a beautiful show and gave traditional gifts to all the children. As they lit the torch to symbolize the beginning of the games I know a number of us listed the things we were grateful for in our heads. The list was very long.

Oh yes, and I can't forget the silly hats and traditional Kazak clothes. The culture welcomed us with open arms and we tentatively but joyfully stepped in.

After Burabay we returned to Astana, then flew to Almaty and headed back to the United States. I honestly couldn't believe it was over. Some of us were ready to head home; others couldn't believe it had gone so fast. We all, however, left with new friends and family.



**Thank you to Kazakhstan, a country that gave all of us an unquantifiable gift. The country will remain in all of our hearts and will travel with us through a lifetime.**