

The anti-religious communist government banned it in the former Soviet republics. In Tajikistan, it was renamed “Tulip Celebration” to avoid the ire of authorities. When the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan, it was outlawed – an ancient pagan holiday centred on fire worship that was against Islam. The theocratic leaders of Iran felt the same way when they came to power in 1979.

Today, in better times, it is a four-day public holiday in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, and a day off for Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Alongside the Muslim festivals of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, it is the biggest celebration in Central Asia. If you’re travelling to this part of the world, you’ve got every reason to come in spring: it’s time to celebrate Nowruz.

CENTRAL ASIA

CELEBRATING NOWRUZ

How the Persian New Year became Central Asia’s most important festival

Text **Ian Seldrup**

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyz girls, wearing traditional costumes, take part in a celebration to mark the Persian New Year.



TO understand Central Asia's relationship with Nowruz (also spelled *Novruz*, *Nourouz*, *Nooruz*, *Navruz*, *Nauroz* or *Nevruz*, and otherwise referred to as the "Persian New Year"), it helps to know a little bit of the history. Indeed, there's a whole lot of history behind this ancient festival.

Nowruz has been celebrated for thousands of years. Its beginnings are partly rooted in Zoroastrianism, the dominant religious tradition in Greater Persia, an area that was centred in present-day Iran and stretched east as far as Pakistan and western China, west to Iraq and eastern Turkey, and north to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Among other concepts, Zoroastrianism emphasises ideas such as the connection of humans to Nature, and the work of good and evil in the world.

While the religion dwindled with the rise of Islam (Zoroastrianism is now only found in isolated pockets of southern Iran and India), Nowruz had been established as a popular celebration among the communities that grew from these Persian cultural areas. In Iran, the traditions have been wholly integrated

Right: Tashkent, Uzbekistan: A girl dances an Uzbek national dance during the traditional spring festival. **Far Right:** Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan: People gather at the Shrine of Hazrat Ali to watch a ceremony for Nowruz that includes raising a large banner. **Below:** Ashgabat, Turkmenistan: With a portrait of President Berdimukhamedov in the background, Turkmen in traditional costume celebrate the Nowruz holiday in the capital.



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INTERNATIONAL DAY OF NOWRUZ

Inscribed in 2009 on the UNESCO List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, Nowruz "promotes values of peace and solidarity between generations and within families as well as reconciliation and neighbourliness, thus contributing to cultural diversity and friendship among peoples and different communities".



with Islamic spiritual life, but in surrounding countries, Nowruz is a festival celebrated by people from diverse religious backgrounds and ethnic communities.

Celebrated on or around March 21, Nowruz (from the Persian words *now*, meaning "new", and *ruz*, meaning "day") marks the beginning of the year on the Persian calendar and the first day of spring. As such, the holiday is about the revival of Nature, the beginning of new life, the rekindling of ties between relatives and neighbours – a time to be joyful, forgiving and kind. The symbolism appears in a riot of colour across the region, as trees and flowers begin to bloom, and markets from Ashgabat to Almaty, Bukhara to Bishkek begin to overflow with fresh fruit and vegetables.

The rituals associated with Nowruz are numerous and diverse, with families in different countries – or even different regions or cities within the same country – celebrating in varied ways. Some are very public affairs, while others take place in the home, and travellers need to become houseguests to experience the traditions observed by families. For many, preparations begin several days or weeks prior to the New Year, with a thorough spring cleaning of the home. It is customary to purchase new clothing and even new furniture.

In some places, on the night of the last Wednesday of the old year, people celebrate Chahar Shanbe Suri (literally "Wednesday Feast"). Lighting small bonfires in the streets, some will leap over the flames and yell out, "*Zardi-ye-man az to, sorkhi-ye to az man!*" – Persian for "May my (sickly) yellowness be yours and your red glow be mine!" The idea is that all of the negativities of the past year are taken away by the fire in exchange for



Left: Baikonur, Kazakhstan: Kazakhs cook a Nowruz dish made from wheat germ called *samanu*.

Far Left: Rudaki, Tajikistan: Tajik riders fight for the body of a goat in a game of *buzkashi* as they take part in Persian New Year celebrations.

the result is a ferocious contest that requires spectators with strong stomachs and very loose attitudes when it comes to animal rights.

No matter where you are in Central Asia around March 21, but especially if you're in the region's capitals, you're almost certain to find Nowruz celebrations in full swing. Without question, there's no better time to see the diverse peoples of the region – Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and others – proudly showing off the same vibrant rituals and traditions that have been practised for generations. **AGP**

warmth, health and vitality for the coming year. Many choose to light a bonfire and simply shout the immortal words – skipping the part about leaping over the flames.

In many countries where Nowruz is celebrated, the main event is the food. Iranians prepare the *haft-seen* ceremonial table, set with seven (*haft*) special edible items beginning with the letter “S” (*seen*): *sumac* (crushed spice of berries), *senjed* (sweet dried fruit of the lotus tree), *serkeh* (vinegar), *seeb* (apples), *sir* (garlic), *sabzeh* (sprouted wheat grass) and *samanu* (wheat pudding) – each with a symbolic significance.

In Central Asia, much of the focus is on the making of *samanu* (also called *samanak* or *sumalak*). After a long period of repeated germinating, washing and grounding the wheat, it is boiled for many hours in giant pots, often during the night and always accompanied by lively dancing and singing of folk songs. By morning, when the *sumalak* is ready, relatives, friends and neighbours get together and enjoy the hearty dish along with an impressive parade of special Nowruz treats. Classic Central Asian dishes like the rice-based *plov* are prepared with a special festive twist, adding the finest meat and the best quality ingredients such as quail eggs.

For travellers, it's the Nowruz celebrations taking place in public that are the most interesting. Special events are laid on in the squares and open spaces of many of Central Asia's major cities, with festivities taking on many different forms. Dance and song feature prominently, with performers wearing elaborate traditional costumes, and crowds dress in their finest clothes for the occasion.

Nowruz is also a great opportunity to catch one of Central Asia's most thrilling spectacles: the Afghan national sport of *buzkashi*, or *kok boru*, as it is known in the former Soviet republics (or *kokpar* in Kazakhstan). Somewhat at odds with the typical New Year notions of goodwill and neighbourliness, *buzkashi*, which literally means “goat grabbing”, involves two large teams of men on horseback battling to grab a headless goat carcass and gallop off with it to score points. The opposing side can do virtually anything to try and snatch the goat back – kicking, punching, horsewhipping – and

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ESSENTIALS

HOW TO GET THERE: Central Asia is best accessed via Almaty, Kazakhstan, on Air Astana (airastana.com), or Moscow, Russia. Both their international airports receive direct flights from major cities throughout Asia and are well connected to Central Asia's capitals.

WHEN TO GO: Nowruz falls on March 21, but can also be the day before or after. Preparations typically begin at least a day earlier (and sometimes days in advance), and festivities last for several days. In some places, the fire-jumping rituals happen on the night before the last Wednesday of the year.

WHERE TO STAY: In both Almaty and Astana (Kazakhstan), a good bet is the Turkish luxury chain Rixos (rixos.com). In Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) or Dushanbe (Tajikistan) try the Hyatt (hyatt.com). Sofitel (sofitel.com) is an excellent choice if you're in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan). In Uzbekistan, try the InterContinental Tashkent (ichotelsgroup.com/intercontinental) or Jahongir Bed and Breakfast (jahongirbandb.com) if you're celebrating in Samarkand.

WHAT TO EAT: Large Nowruz celebrations should give you the opportunity to sample the Central Asian street food classics, especially *manti* (dumplings) and *shashlik* (chicken or mutton kebabs). But keep an eye out for the nuts, fruits and vegetables filling markets with the onset of spring.