

Dispatch From a Tea-Drinking Twamp

Всем привет! My name is Daniella, and I have spent most of the past two years either in Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, or somewhere in between. I am currently a Fulbright Teaching Assistant in Baku, Azerbaijan. Although I've faced my fair share of situational unpleasanties and other hiccups of life overseas, I am relieved to inform you that I long ago identified two key elements of success to life outside of Williamsburg: textiles and tea.

When you first leave home and head to this marvelous region, you open your soul up to the endless potential of textiles. If you are already well-acquainted with the scarves of Eurasia, read no more. But if not... believe me, no one else is as eager as I am to inform you about the scarves. Allow me to share with you a great unspoken truth: no matter where you are, be it the barren Aral Sea or the Tian Shan mountains, the shawl will be your anchor to creature comforts.

You will acquire the first scarf somehow. Perhaps it will be a gift from a local friend, or an impulse buy in Almaty's Zelyony Bazar. Perhaps, drawn in by Samarkand's glittering Registan, you will purchase a scarf... then see the very same scarf at the Istanbul airport duty free a year later. Either way, a scarf **will** find you, like the fiercest of Baku's winter winds, and change everything.

The shawl is what keeps you warm in frigid Astana and unburnt in the dunes of southern Kazakhstan. It will hide your scalp and shoulders in both a Kakhétian church and a Turkestani mosque. It will be your blanket on miserable midnight bus rides and guardian angel on daring marshrutka journeys. Towel, picnic blanket, shield against mosquitos and ticks – the possibilities are endless.

The responsibilities of the shawl you will obtain will be innumerable, but it will bear it all the same with great fortitude. But time brings its scars. At first, the shawl will be a charming accessory, sure to wow friends and reassure yourself of your well-traveled and sophisticated disposition. But in time, the shawl well-loved will reach a state of decay that will deter potential friendship and distress hosts. When, at last, the lamentable cloth finally bids you adieu and flies out a Lada's window, catches on fire, or otherwise dives into the Bosphorus, may you shed a tear and thank it for years of servitude.

As you continue to mourn your scarf, you may find yourself a bit older, behind a desk in an office somewhere between Kars and Zharkent. So devoid of distraction, your thoughts turn not to the task at hand, but to the inherent tragedy of all material goods. White floors. White walls. It all turns to ash, anyway. Your judgement is clouded by not only the Almaty smog, but the growing ache of your all-too human soul...

But then, a miracle occurs. Like a bolt of nearly fatal snow lightning on the shores of the Black Sea, an unexpected guest appears... seemingly from thin air.

With their arrival, the nonsmoker's smoke break, tea time, begins.

Perhaps this unassuming newcomer earnestly wanted to achieve something of importance that afternoon. Really, that might be the case! They came to you in dogged pursuit of a signature or vital document. But what we discover together, us tea-drinking pals, is that there is no need to be so wrapped up in material things. Talkative colleagues, near and far, old and new, let us

briefly forget about sad scarves, white walls, and most certainly about that paper-pushing task at hand... let us remind ourselves of more enjoyable pursuits, like friendship, laughter, and community, over a cup of чай.

Tea has a special place in both Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, although the customs around it may vary. For example, while tea is often served with lemon in slender glass *armudu* glasses in Baku, in Almaty you may have the fortune of sipping milk tea from a ceramic and bowl-like *piala*. These devices have differing aims. The *armudu* retains heat at the bottom, allowing the beverage to cool at the top, ensuring that drinkers can enjoy a pleasurable and lengthy tea drinking experience. Meanwhile, the *piala* is designed with portability in mind, ensuring that nomads could enjoy tea even when on the road. I personally prefer tea from a *piala*.

It is important to also master your tea etiquette. When pouring tea, you generally shouldn't pour for just yourself when in the company of other tea drinkers. Rather, you should offer everyone tea. When it comes to actually serving others the beverage, you must serve with intention. How you allocate this intention is up to you. When I lived in Kazakhstan, the first cup was often offered to the esteemed guest in question, or otherwise the most respected/senior person in the room. How tea is served can be an important way to read the room, an understated tool in cultural competency. Serving tea in an impolite way, for example, can be the first thing someone notices about you (aside from your sad shawl, if it still persists).

But as with everything, tea etiquette is usually specific to a region, or even to a particular community. It's important to study how others approach tea and communal eating as a whole during your own travels, lest you risk offending or otherwise bewildering a new friend. Believe me, the study of tea is worth it.

While an hour of chatter over tea may not deter Almaty's airborne nanoparticles, nor ease the traffic on Al-Farabi, it will banish the smog of your heart. Even now, whenever I am asked чай будете? I always answer in the affirmative. After long days of teaching at my university in Baku, there is nothing I'd rather do than sit with my colleagues at the International Office and enjoy a few cups of tea.

Tea and textiles have gotten me very far in my adventures outside of Williamsburg. By the time I mastered these two aspects of life, I had befriended more than a few bohemian figures, rode a few horses through the mountains, learned a lot of words in many languages, and (briefly) became a techno DJ. Most assuredly, even my average days have become much more thrilling and adventurous since incorporating these two elements into my life. As I look forward to the second half of my fellowship, I am eager to learn more, do more, and of course... pour some more tea for my friends.