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# The Karakol Kaleidoscope

A Cathedral that rose from the ashes of Communism. A mosque built without using a single nail. Karakol is a marvel of history

PHOTOGRAPHS: KUNAL BHATIA and SHUVAJIT PAYNE



(From left) Trinity Cathedral; Dungan Mosque; (below) a house in the city

By KUNAL BHATIA AND SHUVAJIT PAYNE

In the far north-eastern corner of Kyrgyzstan lies Karakol, the nation's fourth-largest city. Founded some 150 years ago, it was a military garrison at the edge of the Tsarist Russian Empire. Flanked by the mighty Tian Shan Mountains and the shimmering waters of Issyk Kul (lake), the province has long drawn adventure seekers. Beyond its natural splendour, Karakol holds a charming secret. "Karakol has been home to many ethnicities," reveals guide Aibek Adigineev, "resulting in a syncretic architectural style unlike

anywhere else in the country." Karakol is a melting pot of communities, some familiar like Russians and Uzbeks, and some less so—Tatars, Dungans, Uighurs, Kalmyks, and others. Take, for instance, the Przhevalsky Museum, which displays a vast collection of journals, maps, memorabilia, and eerily still taxidermy animals collected by Russian explorer Nikolay Przhevalsky. On a mission to reach Lhasa in Tibet, he ended up traversing Central Asia, documenting its geography, flora, and fauna. Ramil Samatkulov, an expert in Kyrgyz architectural history, shares, "The pastel blue building's pediment and columns might showcase European

neo-classical design, but the eagle sculpture above and the pair of running *argali* (wild mountain sheep) on the portico below, root it firmly in the highlands of this region." Another iconic edifice is the Holy Trinity Cathedral, with weather worn wooden exteriors, gilded domes, and a tumultuous past. As Karakol grew from an outpost to a town, migrant traders and farmers pooled funds to build a place of worship and a stone building came up. It was destroyed in the 1889 earthquake but rebuilt in wood. Communism was its nemesis; Stalin's perverse assault on religion devastated it; the cathedral was disbanded and repurposed as a sports hall and a



dance club. Only after the collapse of the USSR in 1991 was the church extensively restored. It took over three years to bring back its original glory.

"Look out for subtle details," Adigineev points out. "See the slanted lower beams on the Orthodox crosses topping the spires? One end tilts upwards to represent the Biblical penitent thief who went to heaven, the other downwards for the impenitent one banished to hell." Inside, the cathedral's whitewashed walls are offset with blue trims, adorned with murals, and hold several altars for worship.

Surrounding the cathedral, Karakol's residential neighbourhoods have maintained their neat grid of one and two-storeyed homes since the town's earliest days. The dwellings here were first made of adobe bricks, but after being damaged in earthquakes, wood became the predominant construction material. Endearingly nicknamed 'gingerbread' houses, they were built by thriving merchants at the turn of the 20th century. With their pastel colours, panelled shutters, and flowering gardens, they are charming sideshows of history.

Just a short walk from the cathedral lies the 115-year-old Dungan Mosque, one of Karakol's most unexpected treasures. Built by the Dungan community, who settled in the city from the 1870s onwards fleeing persecution in China, the mosque pays homage to the traditions of their homeland. Constructed primarily from poplar and elm wood, every structural component was painstakingly prepared over three years and then assembled swiftly in three months without using a single nail.

Inside, under the yellow pitched roof, the *mihrab* (a prayer niche that points towards Mecca) is framed by an intricate wooden portal. But it's the exterior that turns heads. The guide enthusiastically draws attention to the multi-tiered cornice running across the brackets. "Observe the carvings here. Not only are there plants and fruits, but also—rather unexpectedly—phoenixes and dragons. Where else would you spot that in a mosque?" asks our guide proudly.

Karakol's architectural richness hides in plain sight. All it takes is a bit of context, some curiosity, and a passionate Kyrgyz narrator to bring it home.

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