

# **CrossCulture Program**

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**Where the Highlands Meet the Sand**

When we first became pen pals, we joked that we lived in “opposite worlds.” One of us is from the Kazakh highlands, where the horizon stretches endlessly. The other from the deserts of Saudi Arabia, where dunes rise and settle with the grace of a sleeping landscape. Two places that seemed worlds apart, yet the more we spoke, the more we realized how unexpectedly similar our worlds truly are.

In Kazakhstan, my pen pal described how the steppe holds stories inside the wind, tales carried by nomads who traveled with the seasons, passing down songs, traditions, and the wisdom of generations. In Saudi Arabia, I told her how our sands hold poetry and history — verses memorized long before they were written. I shared how the desert shaped our values: generosity born from scarcity, bravery in a landscape with no mountains to escape to, and the deep bonds of a collective society built on family.

Two cultures, two geographies, both shaped by movement, memory, and people who learned to read the land like scripture.

What surprised us most was how often our everyday rituals overlapped. She told me about **baursak**, golden fried dough served during celebrations, a symbol of warmth and home. I told her about **luqimat**, our sweet fried balls drizzled with date syrup, made in almost every Saudi household during special occasions. Different names, different dishes but the same feeling of comfort and togetherness.

As pen pals, we realized that culture is not created only in museums or monuments. It lives in habits, food, stories, and the things youth carry without noticing. Even in our modern lives, music, films, jewelry, fashion, we found echoes of our roots. Despite the rush of contemporary life, both of us felt proud to showcase our traditions.

She told me about **Nauryz**, a celebration of renewal and community that welcomes spring with forgiveness and new beginnings. I told her about **Ramadan**, a month that slows time down and invites reflection, softness, and reconnection. We talked about weddings and pre-celebrations and laughed at how similar they felt: the joy, the colors, the gathering of families. At their heart, both traditions ask the same question: ***How do we begin again?***

One of our most meaningful conversations was about belonging. She admitted she sometimes felt “in between”, too modern to live every tradition fully, yet too traditional for some modern environments. I laughed, because I had felt the same. We realized this “in-betweenness” isn’t a weakness; it’s where culture evolves. It is the bridge between what we inherit and what we create.

We also discovered values held closely by both our cultures: hospitality, generosity, pride in our elders, and a love for stories that begin with “long ago, in the time of our grandparents.” And although Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan differ in geography, religion, politics, and social

structure, an Islamic monarchy and a secular democratic republic, our shared values aligned more naturally than either of us expected. Even our languages carry echoes of one another, shaped by the journeys of traders centuries before our families existed.

With every call, our worlds folded closer together. The highlands and the desert, despite their differences it began to feel like two chapters of the same story. What we valued most from this journey wasn't the similarities or differences, it was the reminder that culture breathes through youth: in how we greet each other, celebrate, mourn, and dream; in how we carry our history forward not by freezing it, but by letting it live within us and sharing it with pride.

In our final shared sentence, we wrote:

**“We come from lands shaped by wind and sand, but what truly defines us is how we continue the stories we inherited.”**

Through the CrossCulture program, we learned that the most meaningful cultural lessons rarely come from textbooks, but from the quiet rhythm of conversations between two people who simply chose to listen.