

# UZBEKISTAN

Along the Silk Road

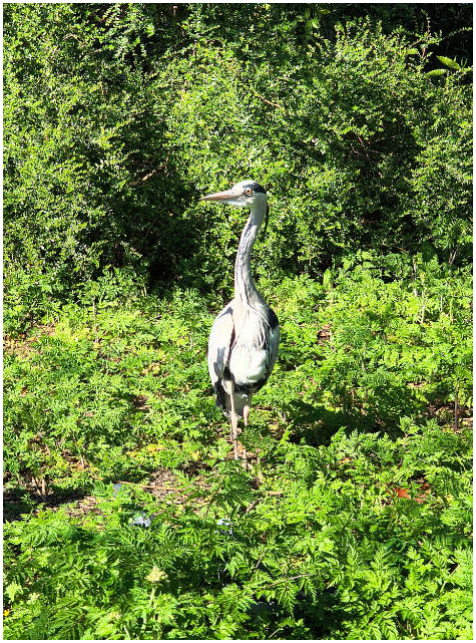
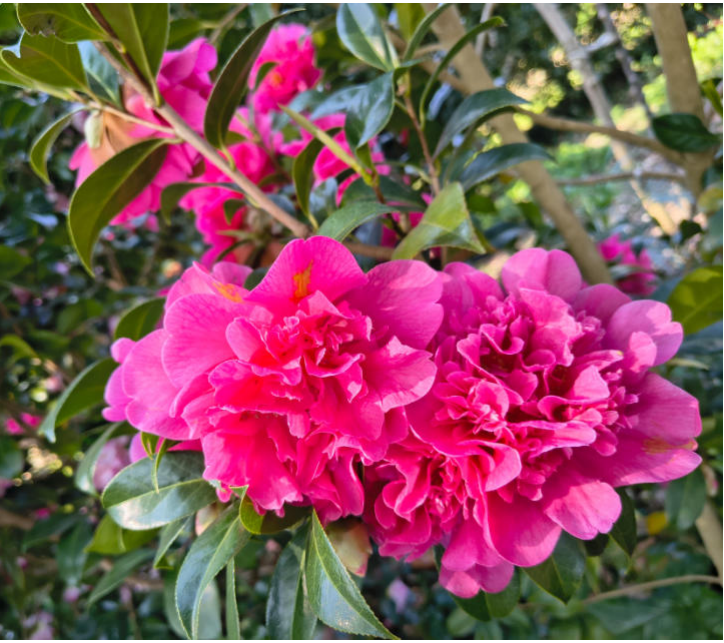
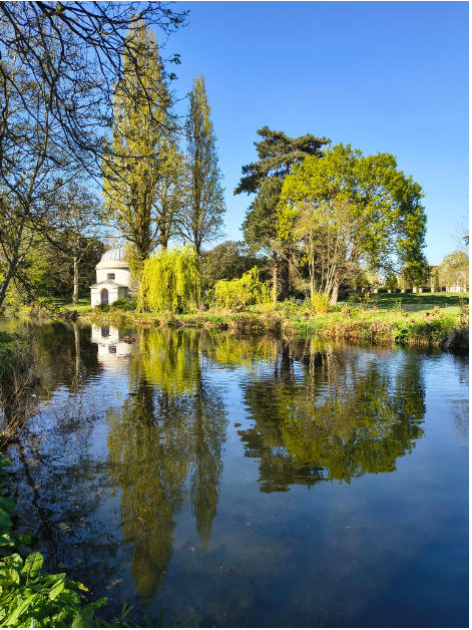
April 2025



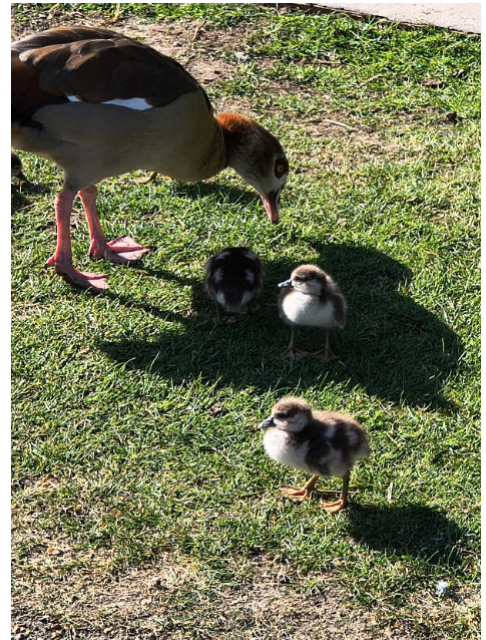
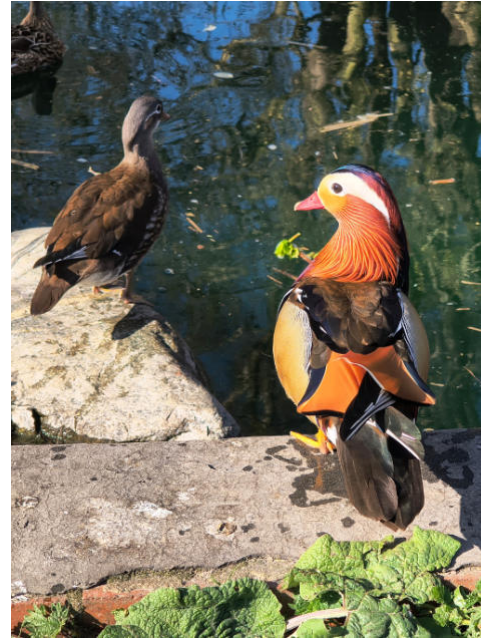


Many of our trips start the same way with a walk down into the centre of Ilminster to catch the coach to London. Although our flight was not until 16:20 we decided not to risk travelling up on the day of the flight and choose to book a room for an overnight stay at the Premier inn in Hammersmith. It is very handy for the coach station and this meant we could catch the 10:00 am coach and then have a few hours to wander around and see what we could find to look at.

Dropping our bags at the hotel, we walked over to Chiswick House and gardens. The house was closed as it was too early in the year, but the gardens and riverside walk were bathed in sunshine.



**LONDON OVERNIGHT**





The following morning we walked along the Thames path as far as Putney bridge before returning to Hammersmith. On our walk we came across several outside broadcast units setting up for the coverage of the University Boat race which was to take place over the weekend.

After our walk we stopped at the Ikea store / cafe for some breakfast before picking up our bags and heading across to Heathrow.

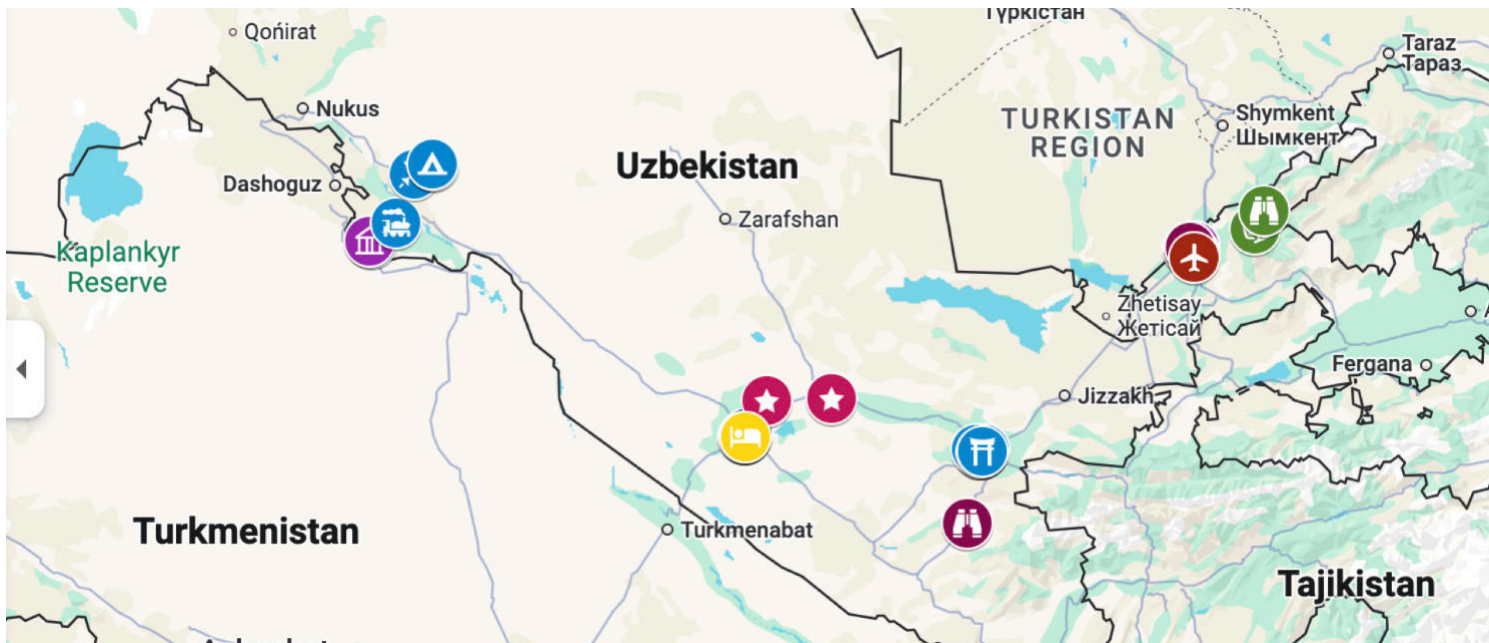
At Heathrow we caught our 7 hour Uzbekistan flight. It was a long flight as the entertainment system was not geared to a UK audience and so we used our phones to listen to music for a while and also tried to get a little sleep as we were to lose 4 hours and arrive into Uzbekistan at 3:00 am, the next day.

On landing, for some reason, the cabin was lit with rainbow colours, not something we had seen before.

By the time we had cleared customs, picked up our luggage and found our guide and driver we got to the hotel a little before 5:00 am. We were able to have a bit of a lie in as our first tour did not leave till 11:00 am.

We were pleased to find our group was very small, just us, Carolyn, Steve and Ashwini.





Located in central Asia, Uzbekistan is one of only two doubly landlocked countries, the other being Liechtenstein. It has borders with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, all of which are landlocked, meaning they have no direct access to the oceans.

Uzbekistan has been a crossroads of civilisations for millennia. It was home to ancient cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, which were key centres of culture and trade along the Silk Road. The region was inhabited by various Iranian and Turkic peoples before becoming part of the Persian Achaemenid Empire in the 6th century BCE.

In the 4th century BCE, Alexander the Great conquered the region, bringing Hellenistic influences. Later, it was ruled by the Kushan Empire and then became a stronghold of Islamic culture after the Arab conquest in the 7th–8th centuries. During the 9th–10th centuries, the Samanid dynasty established Bukhara as a major centre of Islamic learning.

In the 13th century, the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, devastated the region. However, in the 14th century, Uzbekistan rose to prominence under Tamerlane, (Amir

Timur), who made Samarkand the capital of his vast empire. The Timurid Renaissance saw advancements in architecture, science, and literature.

After the decline of the Timurid Empire, the region was ruled by various Uzbek Khanates—notably Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand — from the 16th to the 19th centuries. These khanates were known for their wealth and culture but also engaged in conflicts and internal struggles.

In the 19th century, the Russian Empire expanded into Central Asia, gradually annexing the region. By 1876, Uzbekistan’s khanates had become part of the Russian Empire.

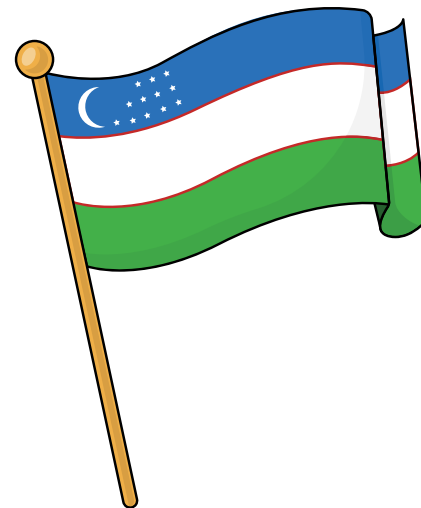
After the Russian Revolution (1917), Uzbekistan became part of the Soviet Union in 1924 as the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. The Soviet era brought industrialisation, forced collectivisation, and suppression of traditional culture. Cotton production became the backbone of the economy, often at the cost of environmental damage, such as the draining of the Aral Sea.



After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan declared independence on August 31, 1991. Islam Karimov became the first president, ruling until his death in 2016. His tenure was marked by a centralised economy, political repression, and limited reforms.

Since 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been president, introducing significant economic, political, and social reforms, including better relations with neighbouring countries, modernisation of infrastructure, and improved human rights policies.

Uzbekistan is experiencing rapid economic growth, with major investments in tourism, agriculture, and technology. It is actively engaging with international partners while maintaining political stability. The country remains an important cultural and historical hub in Central Asia.



## INTRODUCING UZBEKISTAN

# TASHKENT





One of the largest and oldest cities in Central Asia is Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Tashkent is located in the Chirchik river valley west of the Chatkal Mountains in the northeast corner of the country. The city has an arid climate, with extremely hot summers and mild winters. The exact founding date is unknown, though the city was probably established as a village by the 1st century BCE. Throughout its long history, it has been known by many names, including Dzhadzh, Chachkent, Shashkent, and Binkent. It has been known as Tashkent—which means “stone village” in Uzbek—since the 11th century.

For much of the 20th century Uzbekistan was a republic of the Soviet Union, and from 1930 to 1991, Tashkent was the republic’s capital. Many historic buildings were bulldozed to make way for modernised architecture and infrastructure during this period. Much of the historic section, or old city, was levelled by a 1966 earthquake. Although especially devastating, the event was not unique — Tashkent’s location in an active seismic zone has made it prone to many severe earthquakes.

Tashkent experienced a large influx of Russian and other Slavic immigrants after the city was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1865. During the Soviet period, from 1924 to 1991, Slavs made up the largest segment of the urban population. Following independence, many returned to Russia and other Slavic countries. By the early 21st century, Uzbeks formed the largest segment of Tashkent’s population, though large minorities of Russians, Tatars, Tajiks, and other peoples remain. This diversity is also seen in religious practice. While Islam is the dominant religion, there are still a number of active Russian Orthodox churches and Jewish synagogues.



## CHORSU BAZAAR

The first of our few days exploring Tashkent, started with a visit to the vibrant and extremely busy Chorsu Bazaar. A huge dome covers a host of stalls selling everything from horse meat sausages to hats via everything in between. There are hordes of different sellers for each product, with dozens of ladies selling their own breads and a bakery baking right in the middle of the hall.

We explored the market and the overflow outside for an hour or so and then headed onward to our next destination.















*Kukeldash Madrasah*

Kukeldash Madrasah is a medieval madrasa, located close to Chorsu Bazaar. It was built around 1570 by the Shaybanid ruler Dervish Sultan. In 1830-1831 the first floor of the madrasah was demolished, and the bricks were used to build the nearby Beklarbegi Madrasah. It was later restored. The madrasah was damaged by the earthquake in 1868 and subsequently reconstructed in 1902–1903. It was reconstructed again in the 1950s and became one of only several religious buildings that survived the 1966 Tashkent earthquake.

The madrasah was converted into a caravanserai in the 18th century, and then it served as a fortress. In the 20th century it was a museum. In the 1990s, the building became a madrasah again. It now serves as originally intended, as a religious school, similar to a seminary in the christian religion.



Time for lunch.

Starting with a salad and bread, then a soup course then meat and finally a dessert. We soon learned not to over eat on the salads to leave room for the rest of the courses.





The Museum of Applied Arts is situated in the former home of Imperial Russian diplomat Alexander Polovtsev. A grand mansion decorated in traditional Uzbek style, the museum has a superb collection of applied arts. Polovtsev was an avid collector of handicrafts and his personal possessions still form the heart of the museum's collection.

Polovtsev expressed his appreciation of Uzbek architecture by having his residence built by masters from Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, Ferghana and Tashkent. He was transferred before completion in 1907, so he never saw the finished courtyard of verandas and reception halls, vibrant with colour, ganch and wooden carving. The first public exhibition was held here in 1927, and it was classified as a national collection a decade later.





One of the stand out fabrics of Uzbekistan, is the Uzbek Ikat tie dyed fabrics. Unusual in that only the warp threads are dyed prior to loading on to the loom and then woven with plain weft threads. The patterns created are complex and colourful. Traditional cloths are only around 18" wide and are joined to make larger pieces.



1. The rug is made of wool and silk. It is a traditional Persian rug. The design is a variation of the 'Shah' pattern. The colors are bright and vibrant. The rug is displayed in a gallery.



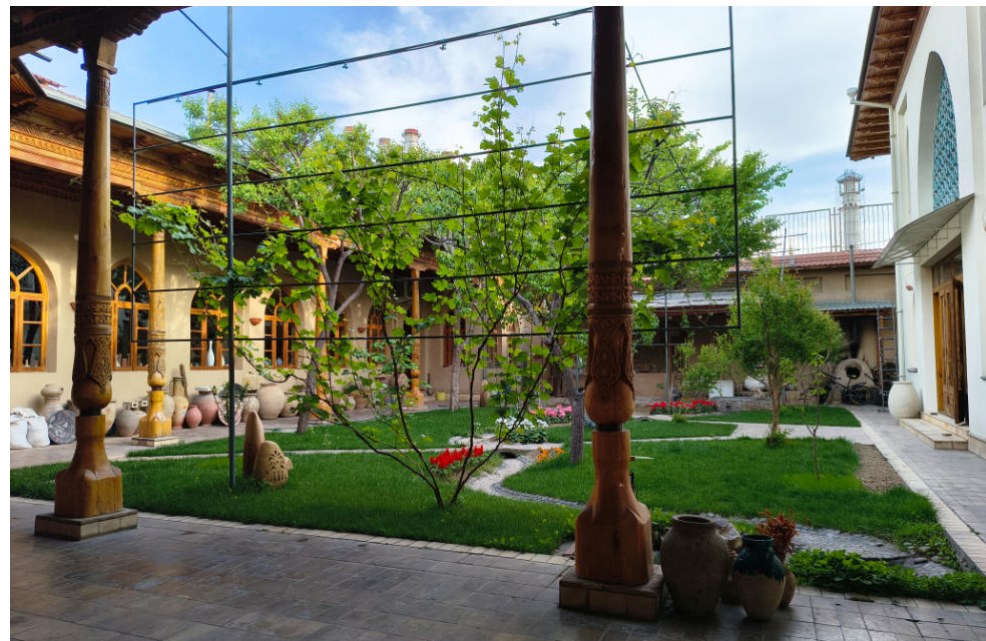
## RAKHIMOV'S CERAMIC STUDIO

When tours suggest a visit to a craft studio, you always worry that you are going to get the hard sell to purchase something. With our final visit of the day to a Ceramic studio we were worried that this could be the same, however we were pleasantly surprised.

Greeted by the current 4th generation of the family and sitting in the leafy courtyard of the studio we were offered green tea and a selection of treats made by various women of the family while our host explained about the studio which aims to keep alive the various pottery styles of the Uzbeks. During the Soviet era, craft pottery was suppressed and it was difficult to maintain the old skills. So the earliest member of the family worked in secret teaching the old skills to his family.

Now there are currently 3 generations working on superb and complex art pieces. Our guide was the youngest Shokhrukh and happily introduced us to the process. The pots are thrown and then covered in a white slip and bisque fired giving a base for the decoration. All the designs are hand painted and each one is slightly different.

Walking around the studio was fascinating as part finished pots were everywhere. Our guide said they often threw new shapes, but it could be months or years before they were decorated.



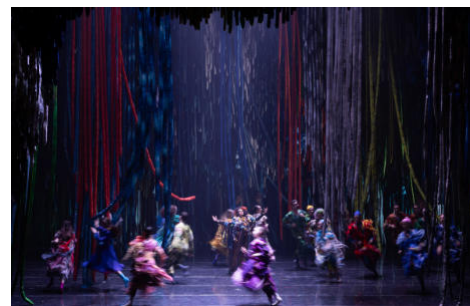






After a rest in the hotel, we headed out for the final part of our first day, a trip to the ballet, a first for both of us. We were not quite sure what to expect, but the opportunity to go into the impressive "Alisher Navoi Bolshoi Theatre" was not to be missed.

Finding our seats we settled in for the 3 part performance. The ballet was live, but was performed to recorded music. The first and last acts were very good, but the middle act's music did rather grate.



The following morning after breakfast we set out for our 2nd day in Tashkent, and started with the Monument of Courage, which is one of the most significant monuments in today's city. The monument honours the victims of an earthquake and the people who rebuilt Tashkent.

On 26 April 1966, at 5:24 a.m., an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.3 shook the city. The incredibly strong seismic shaking changed Tashkent's appearance for ever. Half of the city's inhabitants were left without a roof over their heads and had to live in tents. The earthquake had had its epicentre at a depth of 10 km right under the central blocks of Tashkent, in about the place where the Monument of Courage was erected.

Builders from all over the former USSR participated in the reconstruction of Tashkent. Several months after starting the reconstruction, the first new houses were ready to receive some of the victims of the earthquake. Broad residential quarters sprang up on the outskirts of the capital, while the centre of the city saw its old destroyed buildings reconstructed and renovated.

A black labradorite cube with the date of 26 April 1966 inscribed on one of its sides is installed on a granite pedestal. Another side of the cube presents a clock, the hands of which show the time of 5:24. The cube is split by a crack symbolising the break of the earth and continuing to the foot of the statue, which represents a woman embracing a child and a man trying to protect them with his breast from the strike of the nature. In the background of the monument there is a composition in relief telling the story of the restoration of Tashkent.

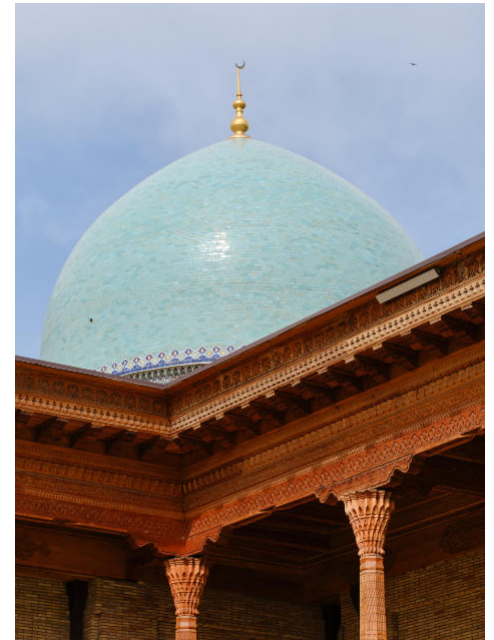




From the monument we wandered through the park and over the canals which supply Tashkent with water before catching up with our driver to go on to the Hazrati Imam Jami Mosque.

The couple having a romantic picnic by the side of the canal seemed surprised to find a small group of Europeans wandering by.







The Hazrati Imam Jami Mosque is used for Friday prayers. The mosque is so named as it is located near the grave of Hazrati Imam, the first Imam - Khatib of Tashkent — a scientist, an erudite scholar of the Quran who translated the Old Testament (Torah) into Arabic, a poet, and a craftsman adept in the art of making locks and keys.



The construction started in the 16th century, but it took a few more centuries to build this beautiful structure. It is now the religious centre of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, revered like the Papacy in Rome.



## AK SARAY PRESIDENTIAL PALACE



This huge building was the Presidential palace of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first President, who ruled from 1991 to 2016. Appointed president for life, when he died the administration built a new palace and left the old palace as a memorial.

The main building was closed, but we were able to visit the museum containing many art works and photographs "celebrating" the first president. You could not help, but wonder if this was a way for the incoming president to "package" the first president away from the new administration.

As we left a large group of school children were being organised for a visit so our timing was fortunate.







Sayilgokh Street in Tashkent is better known by its nickname, Broadway Alley.

The pedestrian thoroughfare connects two of the capital's key attractions: Amir Timur Square, where the Amir Timur Museum is appropriately located, and Independence Square, Tashkent's grandest park.







Tamerlane, also known as Amir Timur (1336–1405), was a Turco-Mongol conqueror and the founder of the Timurid Empire in Central Asia. He is considered one of history's greatest military leaders and is often compared to Genghis Khan due to his vast conquests. However, unlike Genghis Khan, Timur sought to revive the glory of the Islamic Persianate world rather than establish a purely nomadic empire.

Timur was born in 1336 near Shahrisabz, in what is now Uzbekistan. He was a member of the Barlas tribe, a group that had settled in the region after the Mongol conquests. Though he claimed descent from Genghis Khan, he was not a direct Mongol but rather a mix of Turkic and Mongol heritage. As a young man, Timur suffered an injury to his leg and hand — possibly from an arrow — leaving him partially lame (hence the name "Tamerlane," from Persian Timūr-e Lang, meaning "Timur the Lame"). Despite this, he became a skilled warrior and strategist, rising to power in Transoxiana (modern Uzbekistan) by the 1360s.

By the 1370s, Timur had established himself as the ruler of Samarkand, which he made his capital. Over the next three decades, he led a series of brutal campaigns, conquering vast territories including parts of modern-day Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Afghanistan, and India. His military campaigns were marked by extreme violence and destruction, often targeting cities that resisted him.

Despite his reputation as a brutal warlord, Timur was a great patron of arts and architecture. He transformed Samarkand into a magnificent capital, commissioning grand mosques, mausoleums, and madrasas.

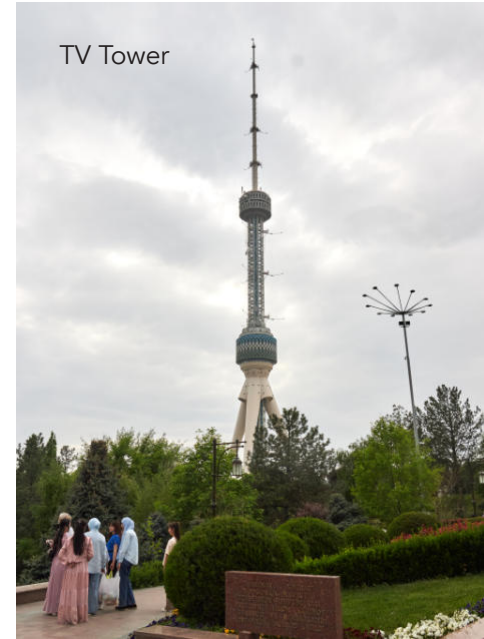
Timur died in 1405 while preparing for an invasion of China. His death left his empire unstable, and within a century, most of his territory had fragmented. However, his descendants, the Timurids, continued to rule parts of Central Asia and Persia, with Babur, a Timurid prince, later founding the Mughal Empire in India.

Today, Timur is seen as a controversial figure, revered in Uzbekistan as a national hero but remembered elsewhere for his extreme military brutality.



Heading to the end of Broadway we reached Amir Timur Square which is dominated by a huge statue of Tamerlane which replaced one of Karl Marx in 1996. Behind the square is the Hotel Uzbekistan, the huge Soviet built hotel, which was rumoured to have been littered with listening devices of the KGB.





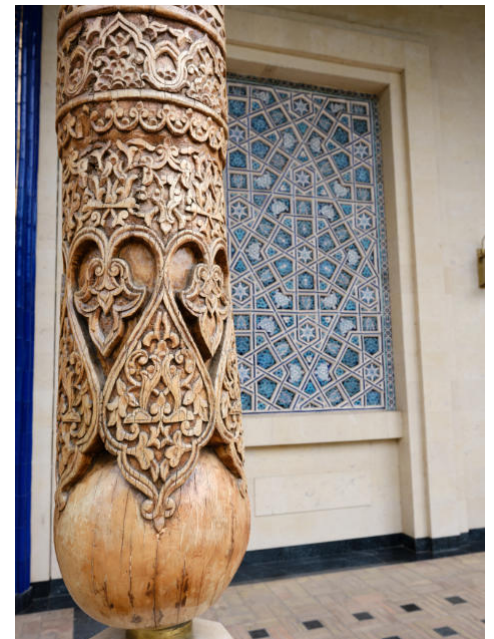
TV Tower



Shahidlar Xotirasi Memorial (in the memory of the victims of repressions) was opened on May 12, 2000 on the bank of the Bozsu near the TV tower. It is devoted to the raising awareness about repression during the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Uzbek historians maintain that the complex is located precisely at the site where "enemies of the people" were executed en masse in the 1930's. From 1920 to 1940, in Uzbekistan alone, about 100,000 people were arrested, 13,000 of whom were shot.

The complex consists of the park, museum and rotunda with the symbolic nephrite tomb. The tombstone bears the inscriptions in three languages Arabic, English and Uzbek: "The memory of those who died for their country will live forever."

In the park there is an artificial river made in the form of meander, the Greek symbol of grief, signifying the inconstancy of fate.



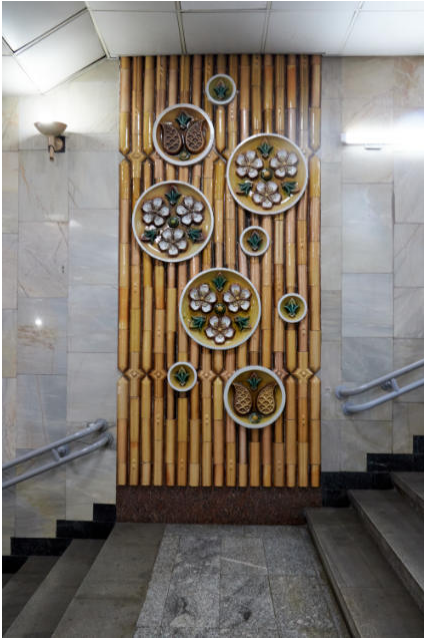


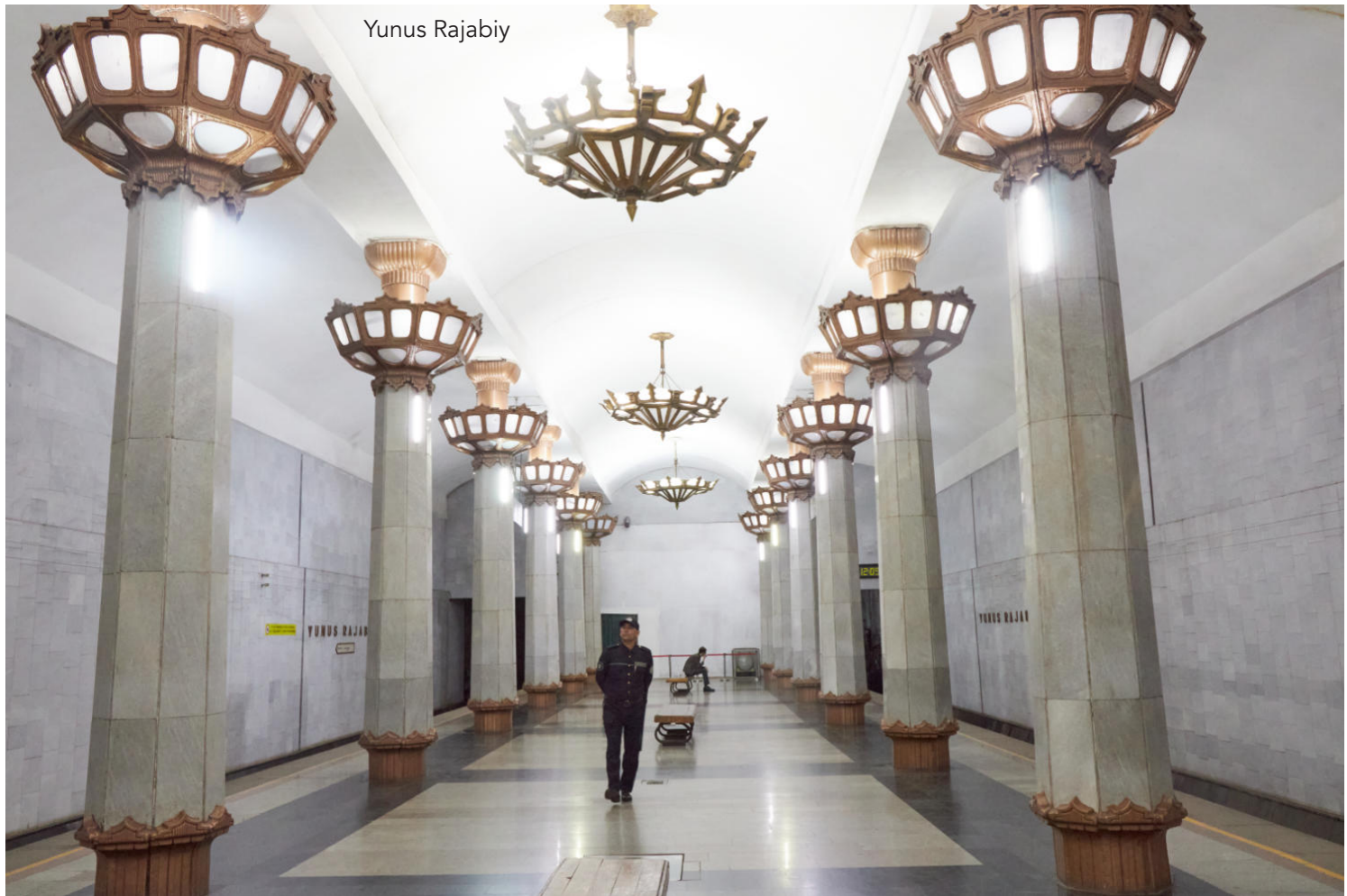
On our way to the TV tower for some views across the city, we stopped at the huge Plov restaurant. Making several variants of this classic dish, this was mass catering Uzbek style. The dishes looked quite greasy so we were pleased to have already eaten elsewhere.



Views from the TV Tower

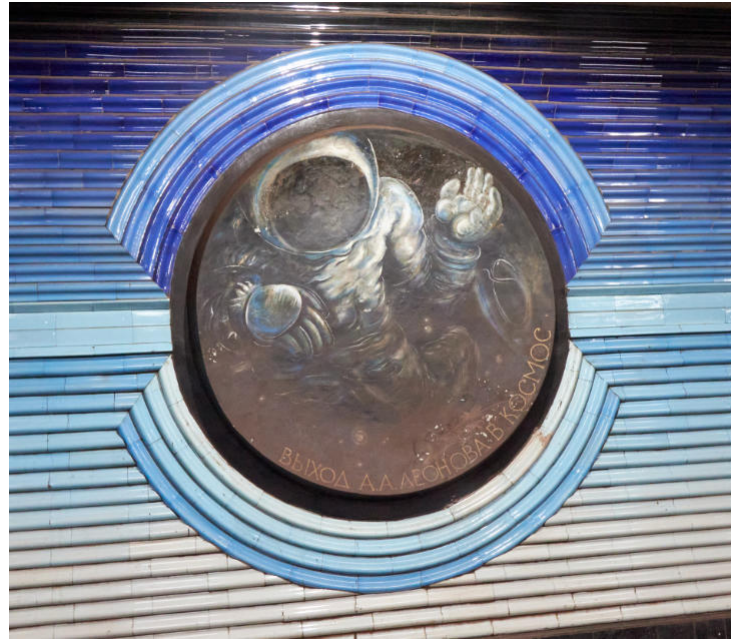






The Tashkent metro was the first underground in Central Asia. During the Soviet era, a city could only have a public rail system if it had a population of 1 million. In the 1960s Tashkent experienced a surge in population growth and the first metro line was completed and opened in 1977. A second line was added in 1991 and a third line in 2001. The third line is not fully completed yet and a fourth one is in the making. The metro is currently 36,2 kilometres long with 29 stations on the 3 lines. Most of the metro trains are still the same ones used during Soviet times.

The metro also functioned as a bomb shelter for the citizens of Tashkent in the event of a nuclear attack. That's why for a long time it was forbidden to take photos or make videos in the metro stations. It is only since June 2018 that this ban has been lifted.





Kosmonavtlar Station was opened on the 31st of December 1984 in honour of the cosmonauts of the Soviet Union. The blue ceramic medallions on the walls feature some of the greatest pioneers of the Soviet space program, including Valentina Tereshkova, the first woman in space, and the world's first cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin.





After two full on days in Tashkent, we headed out northeast into the Chimgan Mountains. The mountains are part of the Western Tian Shan, with the highest peak in the area being Greater Chimgan, at 3,309 metres in height.

A quick stop to admire some storks, before heading to the ski resort of Amirsoy, where we took the two cable cars up to the top of the mountain. Although it was not really clear we did get some lovely views of the mountains.

We came back down and had some lunch before returning to the coach to enjoy more scenery at the Charvak Reservoir.

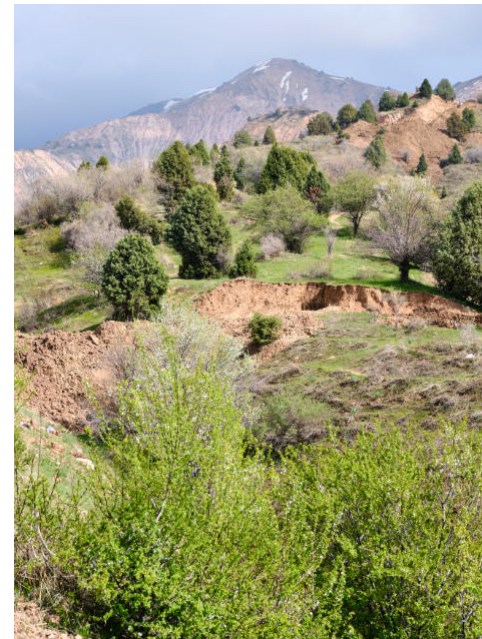
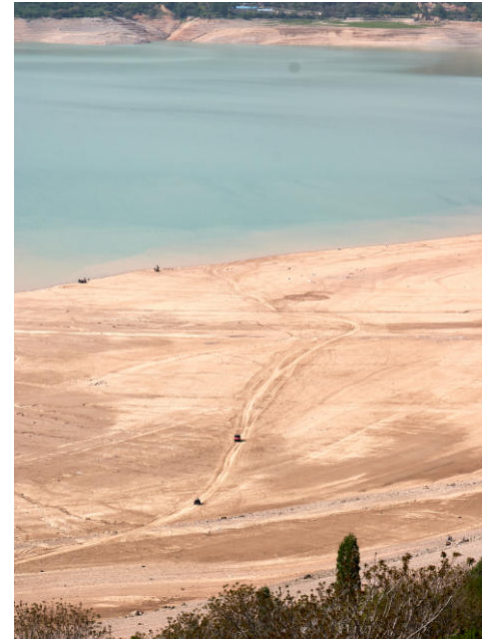








Charvak Reservoir





A quick stop for some people to buy honey and have a chat with the seller.





Another quick stop at Yangi O'zbekiston, a large park on the edge of Tashkent. One of the largest parks in the country, it was established on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Uzbekistan's independence.

Then it was off to our dinner venue, before heading to the train station to catch the night sleeper to Urgench.

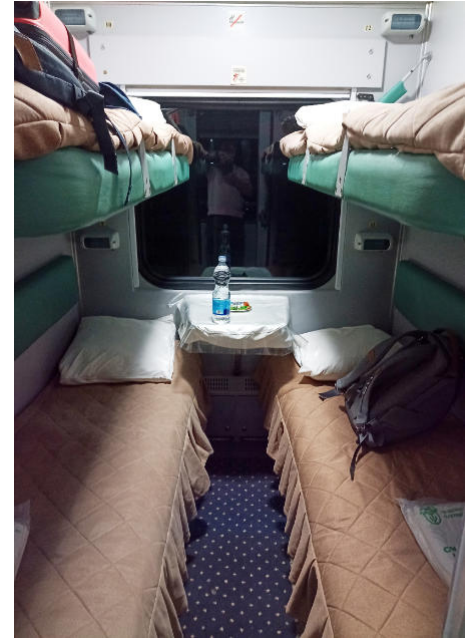
Getting to the station early we waited for a while on the benches on the station, before being able to head across the tracks to load onto our carriage. Muhammad had managed to acquire a luggage trolley for all our bags and helped us to load them up the 3 steep steps onto the train.

The sleeper train was a little different to the last one we travelled on as it was not a tourist option, but a standard service travelling each night across the country. We had a four berth cabin to ourselves with clean sheets and pillow cases provided in sealed bags. Our suitcases fitted easily under the lower bunks and we had a small table to put our water, and other supplies, on.

There was hot water available at the end of the carriage and a small toilet and wash basin as well.

After a surprisingly good sleep we were just considering the day when Muhammad knocked the door bringing green tea to have with our packed breakfasts.

Arriving in Urgench, capital of the Khorezm region, we headed out through throngs of people offering taxis to find our driver and minibus for the next stage of our adventure.



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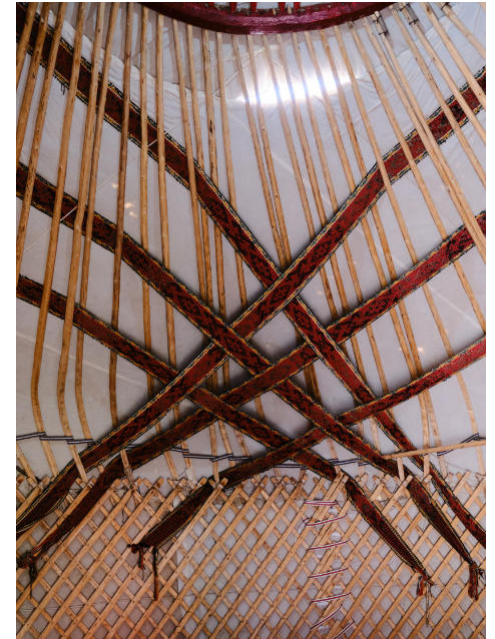


You tend to worry when the travel plan says: "Upon disembarking the train we will drive northeast to Ayaz Kala, where we will have lunch in a Yurt Camp and have a little time to familiarise ourselves with desert life (admittedly, in a rather contrived setting)".

As it was our lunch stop was fun, if not really a Yurt camp, more a service station with tents. Sitting on pillows around a low table in the Yurt, lunch was OK other than the fish which was more bones than flesh, so Jane stuck to the bread and salads.

Along the road we passed an odd partly constructed bridge which looked like it had been intended to replace the level crossing, known locally as "A bridge to nowhere". Later we would see a car parked under it. A very expensive car port!





In the deserts beyond Urgench lie the remains of ancient Khorezm, a region once home to a powerful civilisation in Central Asia. Two of the most significant archaeological sites from this period are Toprak Kala and Ayaz Kala — desert fortresses that provide insight into the political and military structure of the region from over 1,500 years ago.

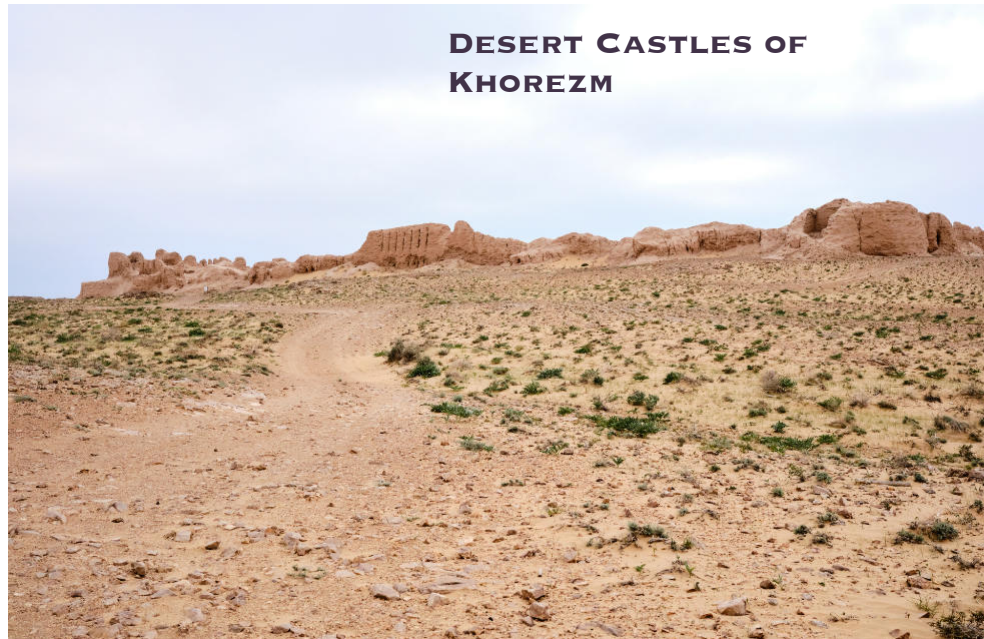
Toprak Kala, meaning “Clay Fortress,” was the capital of Khorezm around the 3rd century CE. It was a planned city, with high mud-brick walls and a central palace complex. Excavations have revealed royal halls, living quarters, and wall paintings that show the artistic and administrative achievements of the time. The layout of the site suggests a well-organised government and a centralised state.

Ayaz Kala, located on a low hill nearby, is a group of three fortresses built between the 4th century BCE and the 7th century CE. These forts were mainly used for defence, protecting against nomadic invasions from the surrounding steppe. The thick walls and lookout towers of Ayaz Kala remain visible today, offering a glimpse into the military strategies of ancient Khorezm.

Both sites are important for understanding how people lived and ruled in a harsh desert environment. They show that Khorezm was a developed society with strong leadership and the ability to build lasting structures in challenging conditions.

The castles were not excavated until the 1930's when a Russian archaeologist, Sergey Pavlovich Tolstov, explored them. At the time most were simply known to the locals as the mud hills.

## DESERT CASTLES OF KHOREZM

















# KHIVA

Khiva is an ancient city in modern-day Uzbekistan, located in the Khorezm region. It began as a small oasis settlement over 2,500 years ago and became an important trading centre on the Silk Road.

By the 10th century, Khiva was a known hub for commerce and Islamic culture. In the 16th century, it became the capital of the Khanate of Khiva, a powerful and sometimes brutal Central Asian kingdom. The city was known for its slave markets and impressive Islamic architecture.

In 1873, the Russian Empire invaded and made Khiva a protectorate. Later, it became part of the Soviet Union and then, in 1991, independent Uzbekistan.

Today, Khiva's old town, Itchan Kala, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, famous for its preserved walls, minarets, and madrasahs.

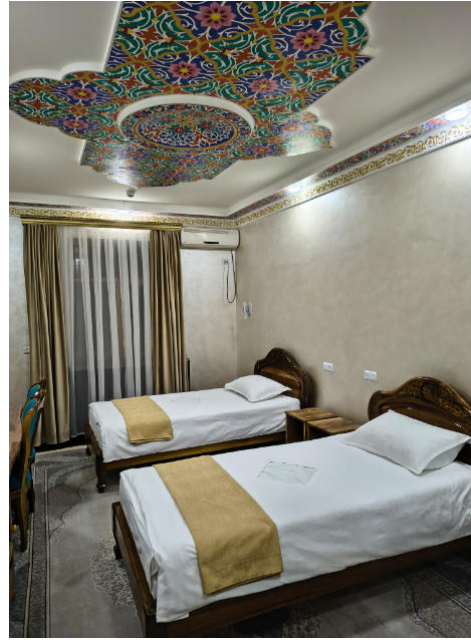
After a few hours wandering around the amazing mud block cities, we headed onward to Khiva and our small hotel within the ancient walls of the city.

Passing through the guarded city gate and into the citadel, it was strange to think the gates had been like that for centuries. The current walls only date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but stand on earlier ones.

Our hotel, Shaherezada Boutique Hotel, was just inside the walls and as we entered it felt very special. We got our keys and settled gratefully into the room after spending the previous night on the train.

We later headed out for a pizza, salad and a very welcome beer.

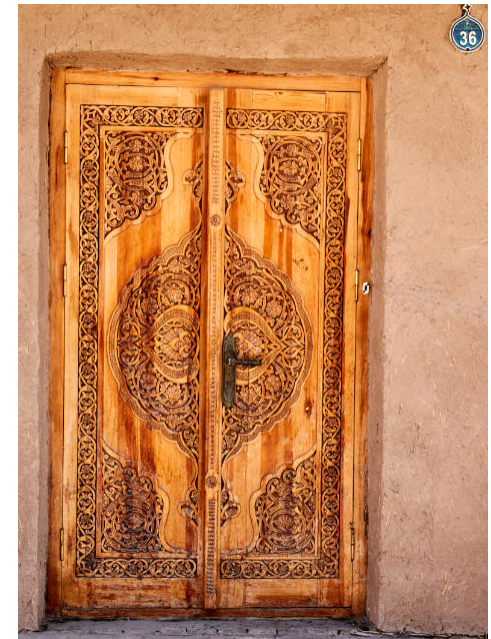






After a good nights sleep and a lovely breakfast we met up with Muhammad for a walking tour of the city, starting with the outer walls.

Embedded in the walls were a number of tombs. With a high water table it is not possible to bury below ground so they are built in layers into the walls. Historically only people who died within the walls could be buried within them. This lead one Kaliph to move the walls out to allow a mausoleum for his father to be built even though he died outside the walls.







After going out of the walls to come back in via the ticket office, our first stop was the Orient Star Khiva Hotel. The hotel is located in the Muhammad Amin Khan Madrasa, which was built between 1851 and 1855. Originally, it served as a religious school — the largest in Khiva — housing up to 250 students. The madrasa's historic architecture has been preserved, and today it functions as a hotel, letting guests stay in rooms that were once student cells.

Just outside the hotel is the Kalta Minor Minaret. A short, wide, unfinished minaret covered in colourful tiles. It was intended to be the tallest minaret in Central Asia but construction stopped in 1855. So it stands as a stumpy tube looking, to us at least, like an overgrown flower vase.

Orient Star Hotel











The Kunya-Ark Citadel, meaning “Old Fortress,” is one of Khiva’s most significant historical landmarks. The citadel served as the official residence of Khivan rulers from the 17th century until the early 20th century. More than just a fortress, Kunya-Ark was a self-contained royal city within the city, housing everything the Khan and his court needed to govern and live.

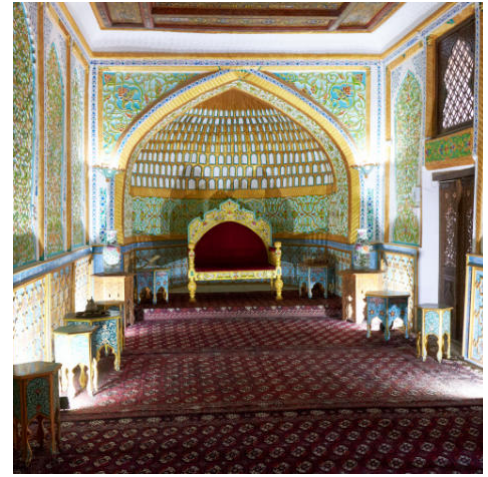
Construction of the citadel began in 1686 by Arang Khan, who wanted to create a secure and separate complex for the royal family and administration. Over time, the citadel was expanded by successive rulers, adding new structures such as the harem, reception hall, (kurinishkhana), mosque, arsenal, mint, and stables. It was also fortified by high walls, ensuring privacy and security.

One of the most notable parts of Kunya-Ark is the kurinishkhana, where the Khan would receive dignitaries and conduct official business. The reception hall is richly decorated with blue and white tile work, carved wooden columns, and a throne platform, offering insight into the grandeur of Khivan royal life. Visitors can still see the Khan's throne displayed there today.

Another key section is the harem, a private area where the Khan’s family lived. Though simpler than the public spaces, the harem provides a glimpse into the daily life and domestic environment of Khiva’s elite. The summer mosque within the complex features beautiful open-air architecture, including a domed ceiling and finely detailed ornamentation.

Kunya-Ark also played an administrative role. The mint produced local currency, while the arsenal stored weapons. These practical elements highlight the citadel’s function not just as a royal residence but as the political and economic centre of the Khanate.









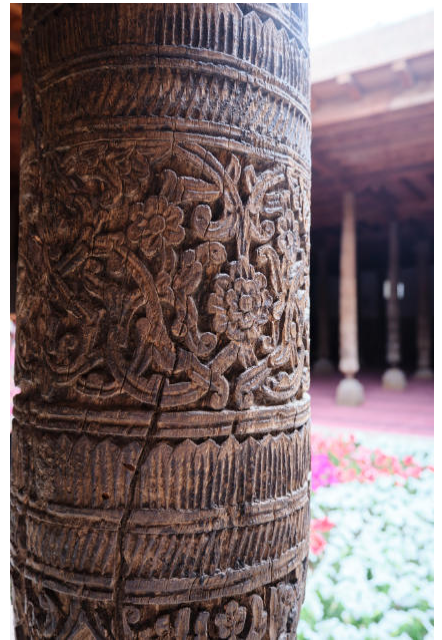
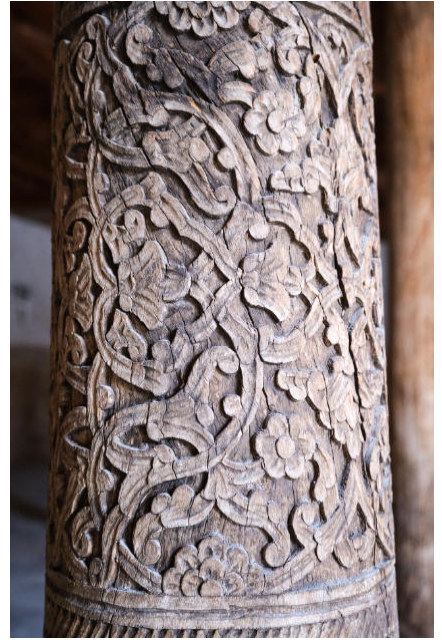


## JUMA MOSQUE

The Juma Mosque in Khiva has a forest-like interior supported by an array of intricately carved wooden columns. The mosque was originally established in the 10th century, though the current structure dates from a major reconstruction around 1788. Unlike the typical domed Islamic mosques, Juma Mosque features a flat roof supported by 218 wooden columns arranged in parallel rows. These columns vary in age, with some dating back to the 10th to 12th centuries, while others were added during later restorations. Each column is uniquely carved, often displaying floral or geometric motifs, and many were repurposed from older, possibly even pre-Islamic, structures giving the mosque a layered, historical character.

Its serene and dimly lit interior, which is gently illuminated by three skylights cut into the roof. These openings allow natural light to filter through the wooden beams, casting dramatic shadows and creating a peaceful, contemplative atmosphere. The interior is spacious and understated, designed to accommodate large congregations for Friday prayers — the purpose for which the mosque was originally built. It stands as one of the few surviving examples of hypostyle mosque architecture in Central Asia.

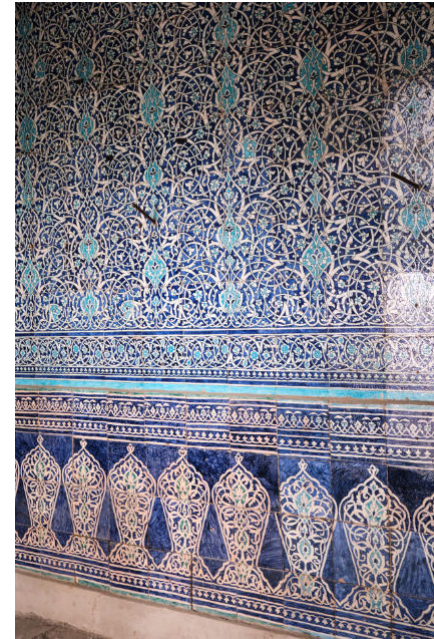




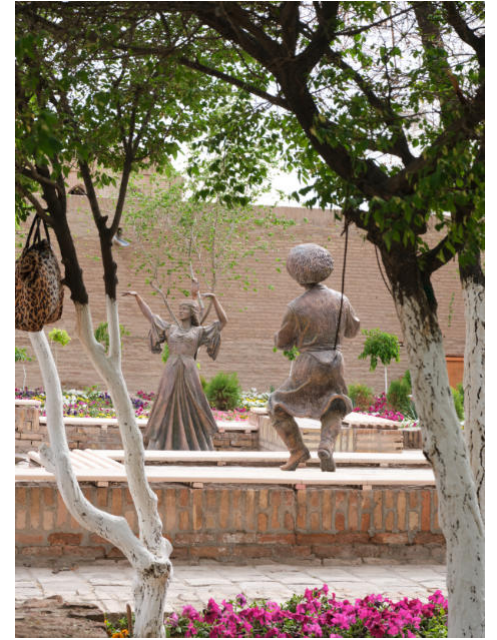




Tash Khauli Palace



Our last stop was the Tash Khauli Palace. A 19th century palace hidden behind a plain facade.



After an amazing day in Khiva, including meeting Muhammad's wife at our lunch restaurant, and a few hours to wander around on our own, we settled into our hotel for the night. In the morning we said a sad goodbye to Khiva and set out early for the long drive to Bukhara.

From Khiva, located just a few miles from the border with Turkmenistan, we crossed the Amu Darya and the Chimgan Mountains. Passing by Toprak Kala and the Darya river, gradually leaving behind the well-irrigated and relatively fertile Khorezm region, we travelled southeast towards Bukhara. Once the road began to draw away from the Amu Darya river, the scenery became increasingly arid and unforgiving as we entered the Kyzylkum Desert. From there on, we encountered only a few and infrequent settlements along the way.

We broke the journey en route at a basic café, and stopped at a couple of other points along the way to stretch our legs.

After a drive of around eight hours, we arrived in Bukhara, a little tired but excited to explore the historic city.









# BUKHARA

Bukhara was a prominent stop on the Silk Road trade route between the East and the West, and a major medieval centre for Islamic theology and culture. It still contains hundreds of well-preserved mosques, madrassas, bazaars and caravanserais, dating largely from the 9th to the 17th centuries. With a population of almost 300,000 it is much larger than Khiva, but still has a well preserved centre with several covered gates which are still filled with stalls as they would have been in ancient history, even if now they mostly sell handicrafts rather than the spices of old.

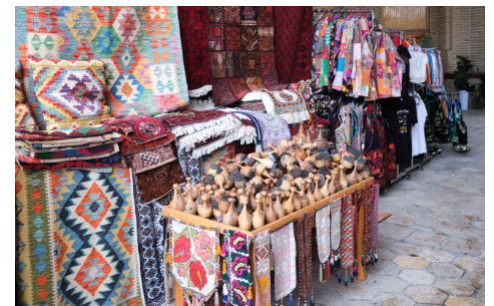
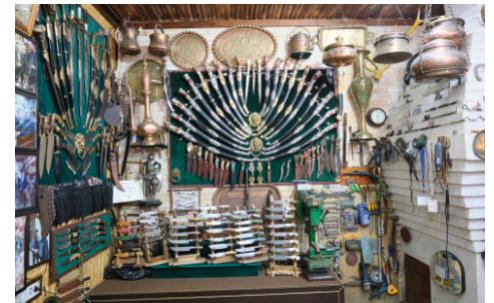


We were in Bukhara for 3 nights and our hotel, the Hotel Shahriston, sat square in the centre of the main street in the old town. To get to it from the drop off point we walked through one of the the city gates and the into the hotel's palatial entrance hall.

Our room was very nice with a big shower in the ensuite, (which leaked a bit), and some very jazzy tiles.

After a good night's sleep we headed up to breakfast as the restaurant was on the roof with a terrace overlooking the city. There was a huge range of dishes to try.









Friday was our day to explore Bukhara on foot. Unfortunately it was also quite cloudy and later came on to rain. It was an interesting place to explore, although it is included on many more of the standard Uzbek tours, there were more vendors and tourists around.

It was a whirl of blue tiled buildings as Muhammad lead us around the city.

A couple of the museums were closed so it was mostly walk and look experience.



*Abdulaziz Khan Madrasah*



*Kalon Tower*



The Kalyan Minaret (Kalon Tower) of the Po-i-Kalyan mosque complex, designed by Bako, was built on an earlier existing structure called Kalyan by the Qarakhanid ruler Mohammad Arslan Khan in 1127.

About a hundred years after its construction, the tower so impressed Genghis Khan that he ordered it to be spared while the surrounding area was destroyed by his men.

It is also known as the Tower of Death, because until as recently as the early twentieth century, criminals were executed by being thrown from the top. Fitzroy Maclean, who made a surreptitious visit to the city in 1938, says in his memoir *Eastern Approaches*, "For centuries before 1870, and again in the troubled years between 1917 and 1920, men were cast down to their death from the delicately ornamented gallery which crowns it."



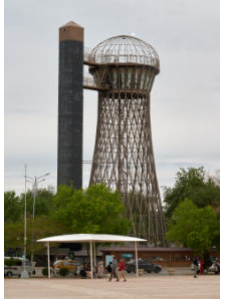




Muhammad and Carolyn



Out and about



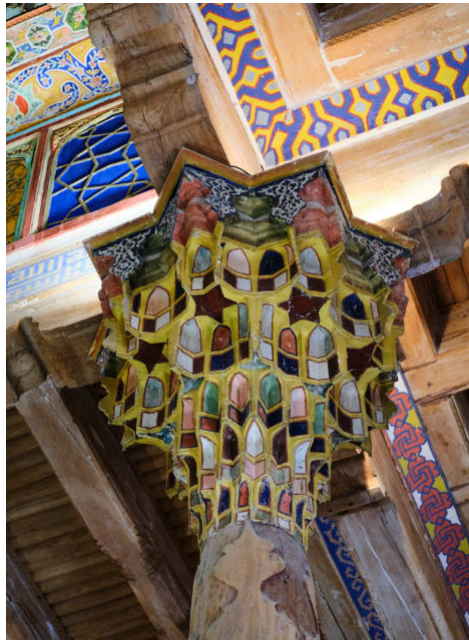
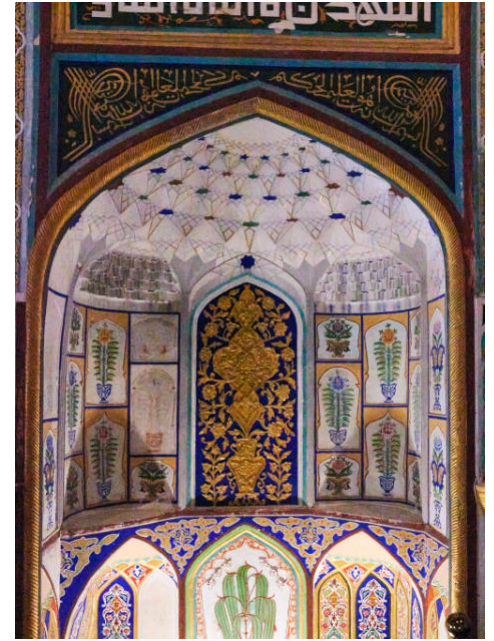
Ark of  
Bukhara



This spectacular fortress, or Ark, is the oldest structure in Bukhara, dating all the way back to the 5th century. Since then, it has been inhabited by various peoples. There were over 3000 people living there, when the Red Army attacked it in 1920. The attack involved an aerial bombardment and much of the site was left as waste ground.

It was mainly known as the residences for the Bukharan emirs, but also housed appointed officials, poets, and scholars. With royal palaces, government offices, stables, and libraries, the Ark of Bukhara truly functioned as a city within a city.

The few remaining buildings are now used as museums displaying the history of the Ark and the remains of the royal apartments.





Left: The Samanid Park's Ferris Wheel

Below Left: Bolo Haouz Mosque (1712)

Below Right: This statue is near the historic Bolo Haouz Mosque and depicts Khodja Nasreddin. He is a beloved folk character known across the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond for his sharp wit, humour, and wisdom. Often portrayed as a clever trickster or a wise fool, his stories carry deep moral lessons wrapped in humour and absurdity.





The Samanid Mausoleum is one of the oldest and well-preserved examples of early Islamic architecture in Central Asia. Built in the 10th century it served as the resting place for Ismail Samani, the founder of the Samanid dynasty.

The mausoleum is renowned for its architectural innovation, featuring a square structure with a central dome, made entirely of baked brick with intricate geometric patterns. The building's detailed craftsmanship have made it a masterpiece of early Islamic art and an important symbol of Persian cultural heritage.



Later in the afternoon the rain arrived in full force and we headed into a couple of museums to escape the rain before returning to the hotel.

In the evening we headed out to what should have been a cultural event held in one of the ancient madrasah courtyards, but the weather meant we ended up in a rather cramped hotel function room which did not really suit the live music which was very loud in the enclosed space. However the costumes and fashion show elements were very interesting.



After a good nights sleep, we headed out for our 2<sup>nd</sup> day around Bukhara, accompanied by drizzle. For the morning we drove out to a couple of sites further out of the main city. The first was the Bahoutdin Complex.

The site is dedicated to Bahouddin Naqshband, a revered 14th-century Sufi saint and founder of the Naqshband order. It serves as both a place of pilgrimage and an example of Central Asian Islamic architecture. The central feature is the marble tomb of Naqshband himself, surrounded by a courtyard where pilgrims and visitors quietly walk, often completing three respectful circuits around the grave as a traditional blessing.

Adjacent to the tomb is the Khakim Kushbegi Mosque, notable for its painted wooden ceilings and intricate tile work. The Saho-khona pavilion and the Abdulaziz Khan Khanaka, a former Sufi lodge, are also part of the complex.

One of the most striking areas was the Dahman-Shahon, or "Necropolis of Kings," where high-relief marble tombs of historic rulers add a regal aspect to the otherwise spiritual space. The entire complex has been restored following periods of neglect, particularly during the Soviet era, and now stands as a testament to Uzbekistan's cultural and religious heritage.







## SITORAI MOKHI-KHOSA

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> stop of the morning was Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa Palace. The palace complex is divided into two main sections: the older Oriental-style structures and the newer European-influenced buildings. The main entrance is marked by an ornate gate adorned with red-maroon decorations, a colour scheme atypical for Central Asian architecture. Upon entering, visitors are greeted by lush gardens, courtyards, and a series of buildings that once housed the Emir's private chambers, reception halls, and administrative offices.

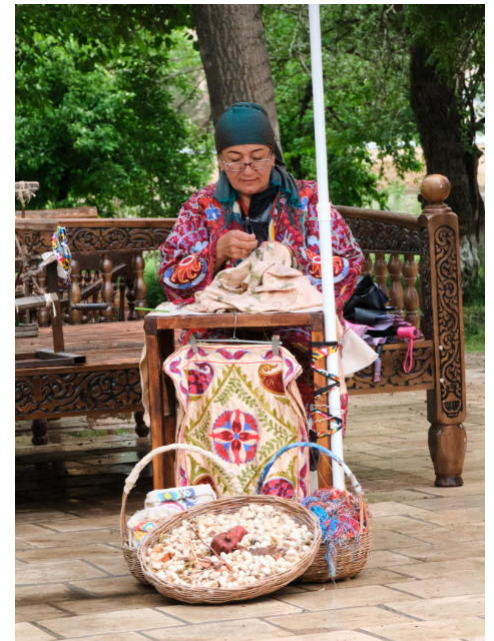
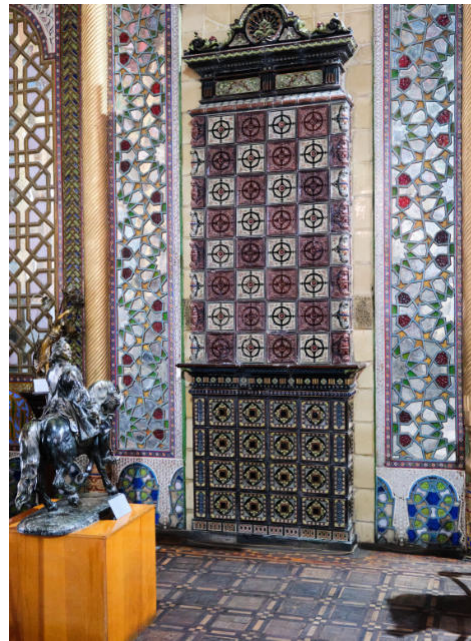
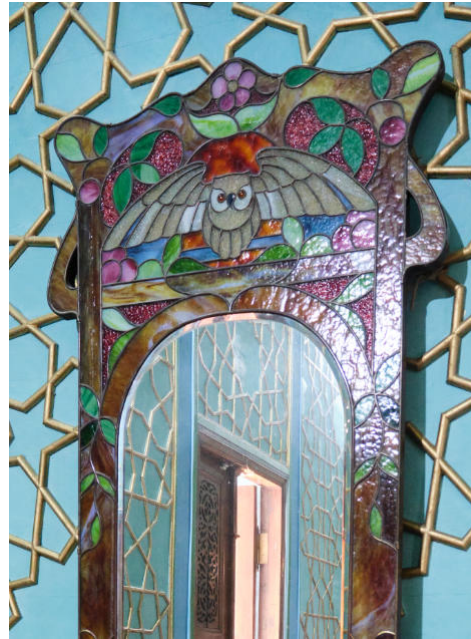
One of the most notable features is the White Hall, or Khona-i Safed, crafted by master artisan Shirin Muradov. The hall's walls are covered with non-repeating patterns, showcasing a high level of craftsmanship. The hall is illuminated by a grand chandelier imported from Poland, and the furnishings include items brought from Russia, England, and Germany, such as door handles, locks, and fireplace tiles.

Adjacent to the main buildings is an octagonal guesthouse, which now hosts an exhibition on traditional Bukharan clothing, ranging from the late 19th / early 20th centuries. The collection features gold-embroidered robes, belts, scarves, and shoes, reflecting the opulence of the period. Additionally, the palace grounds include a former harem, now adorned with Suzanis (tiled decorations) from Urgut and Shahrizabz, and a garden area that once housed a zoo.

Following the fall of the Emirate in 1920, the palace was converted into a museum in 1927. Today, it houses the Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts, featuring exhibitions on palace interiors, traditional clothing, and regional embroidery. The museum offers visitors a glimpse into the luxurious lifestyle of the Bukharan elite and the rich cultural heritage of the region.











For lunch we had a very unusual venue, the upstairs rooms of the the Ustoz Shogird Miniature Workshop.

Set in the old town it is a vibrant centre dedicated to preserving the ancient art of miniature painting. Founded by master artisan Davlat Toshev, the workshop embodies the "ustoz-shogird" (master-apprentice) tradition, nurturing young talents and passing down intricate techniques through generations. Davlat explained many of the pupils start as young as 7 and are educated in the traditional arts. We were able to admire the superb art from these young artists, before sitting down to a huge lunch surrounded by hundreds of images.





You find the little Char Minar, in a maze of alleys, but thankfully Muhammed knew the way. It bears more relation to Indian style than to anything Bukharan. This was the gatehouse of a long-gone madrasah built in 1807. The name means 'Four Minarets' in Tajik, although they aren't strictly speaking minarets but rather decorative towers.

In the afternoon we had some time to rest and explore and the weather cleared up a bit as we wandered around the city.



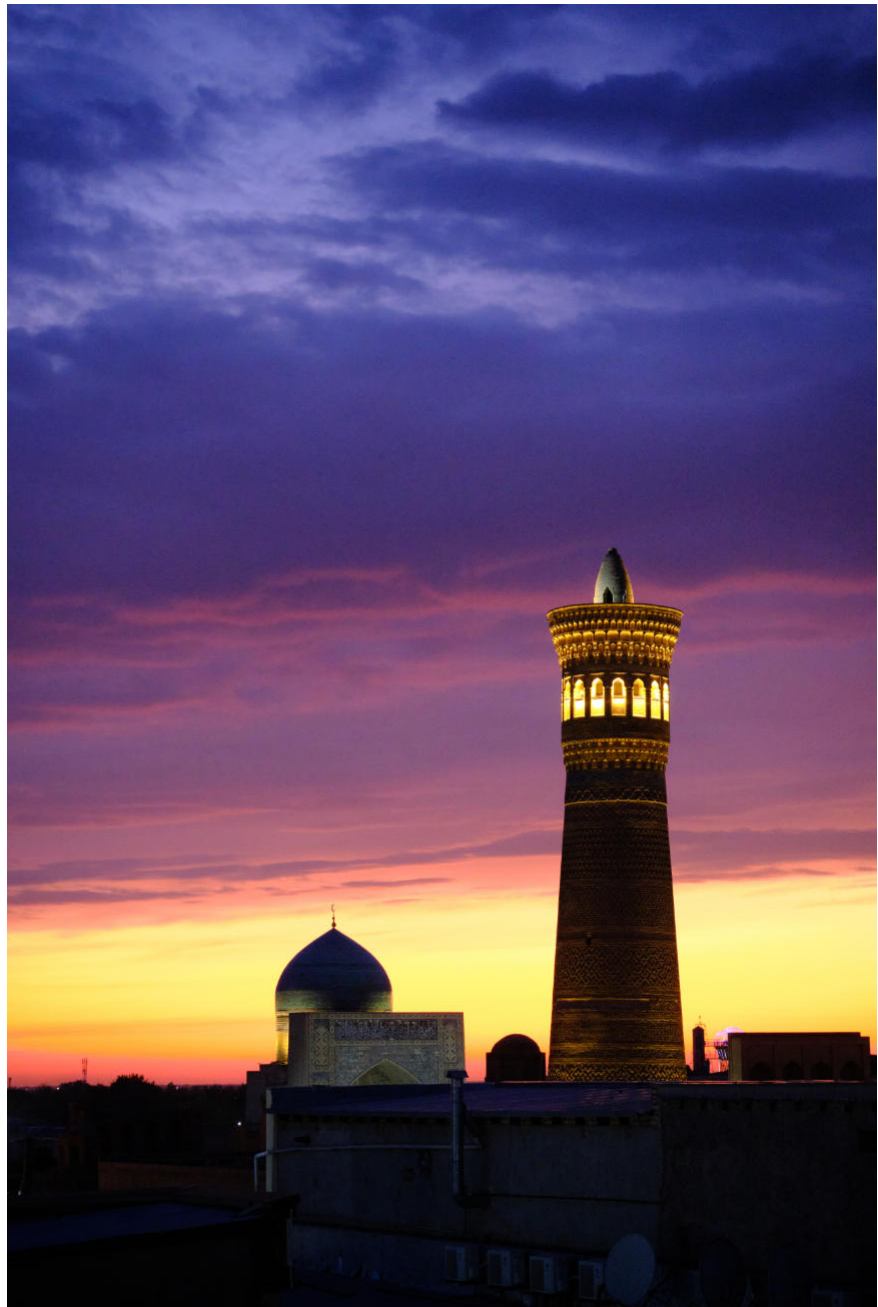








In the evening from the roof of our hotel we were treated to a specular sunset, with the sky layered in purple pink and gold

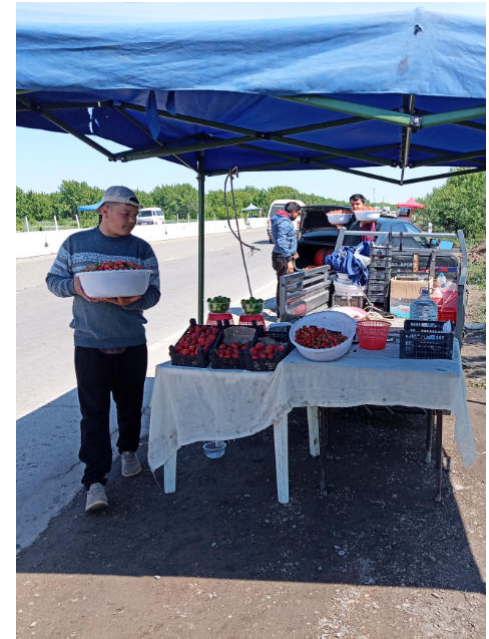
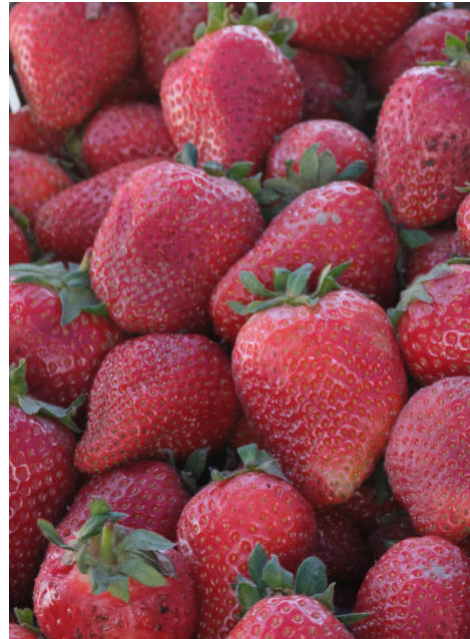




A last early morning wander around the city was accompanied by lovely blue skies. Then it was time to load up and move on to our next location.

It was a full day in the coach, but we enjoyed several breaks along the way.

Firstly we stopped at one of the many roadside stalls selling strawberries and very nice they were too.



## Narzullaev Family Ceramic

Located about a 30-minute drive from Bukhara, the small town of Gijduvan lived up to its reputation as one of the most important centres of ceramics in Central Asia. The Narzullaev family, who have mastered this art for nine generations, welcomed us warmly into their workshop.

Gijduvan's ceramics, known for their distinctive dark green and brown patterns, have been celebrated along the Silk Road for centuries — rivalled only by the famous blue ceramics of Rishtan in the Fergana Valley. We learned that the current patriarch, Mr. Alisher Narzullaev, has been honoured with numerous international awards and has presented his masterpieces to notable figures such as HRH the Prince of Wales and Hillary Clinton.

Three generations of the family demonstrated the entire process — from sourcing local clay and mixing it with organic plants, shaping the objects on a potter's wheel, adding freehand intricate designs on dried pieces, making the glaze powder using a donkey-powered mill, and firing the ceramics in a large traditional kiln.

We then stayed for lunch, before continuing our journey.





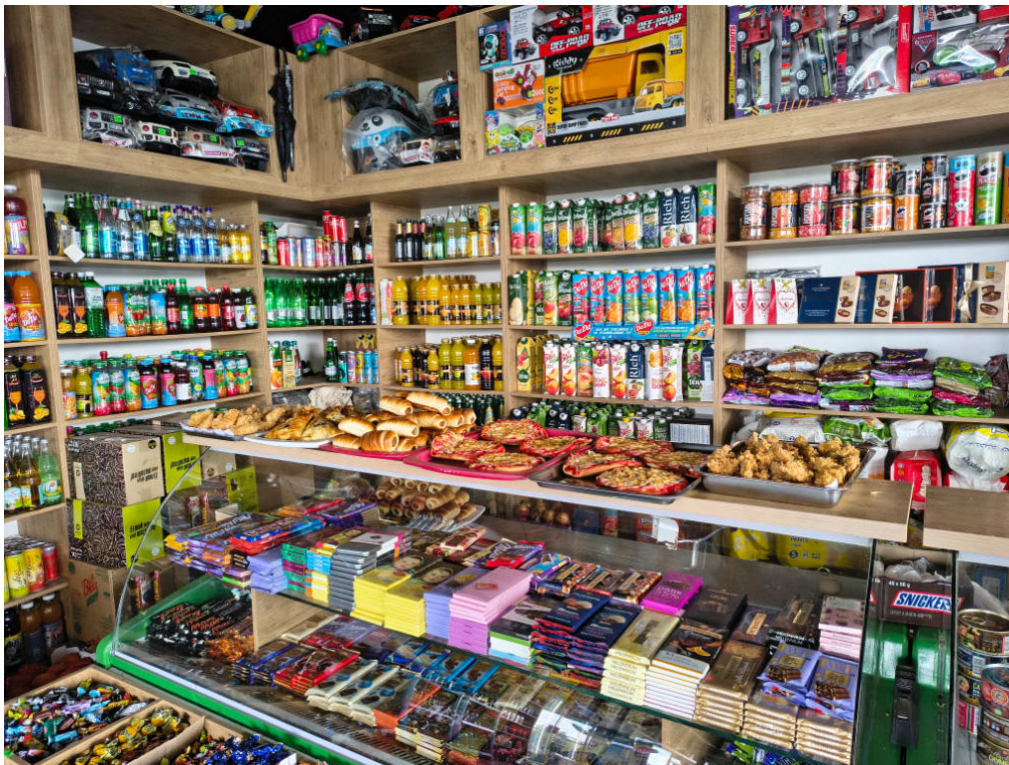


We had a quick stop to look at the Rabat-i Malik Caravanserai. Rabat-i Malik was originally a fortified steppe residence for Turkic rulers of the Karakhanid dynasty, who ruled Transoxiana during the 11th and 12th centuries. After the Mongol conquest in the 13th century, it was transformed into a caravanserai—a roadside inn for trade caravans—until the early 18th century.

The complex once included living quarters, a kitchen, a bathhouse, a mosque, and stables. Nearby stood a sardoba, a covered water reservoir, which still survives today. This site lay along a key segment of the historic Silk Road. Today, only ruins and the entrance portal remain.



As we headed down to the site, Jane thought she saw an animal moving about, but was not sure what it was. She could see holes around the site suggesting something was living there. When we headed back to the coach, the animals came out again. Mohammed said they were Ground Squirrels and were quite numerous as people stopping to see the ruins probably fed them.



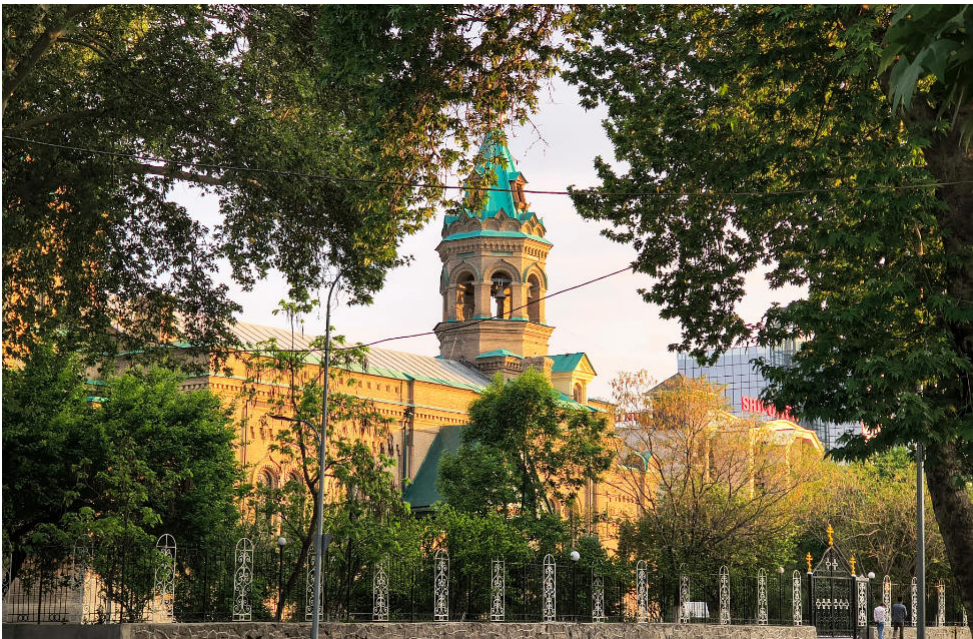
A few more hours in the coach and we took a comfort break at the Coffee Life. Which was a really interesting take on a service station. We resisted all the cakes and snacks having had a huge lunch at the ceramic studio.





# SAMARKAND

Samarkand is one of the oldest cities in Central Asia. It has a rich history dating back over 2,500 years and was another key silk road city, serving as a major centre of trade, culture, and learning. Renowned for its stunning Islamic architecture, especially from the Timurid era, Samarkand is home to iconic landmarks like Registan Square, Shah-i-Zinda, and the Bibi-Khanym Mosque. The city reflects a blend of Persian, Turkic, and Mongol influences and is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its historical significance and architectural beauty.



In the late afternoon we arrived at our next hotel in Samarkand, where we had a quick wander around the gardens of the hotel and the park next to it, to stretch our legs after a long time in the coach.

In the evening we went to a lovely restaurant located just behind Registan Square.



After a good nights sleep we were up and about early enough for a quick loop around the park, before joining the others for a grand tour of the main sites of Samarkand, starting with Gur-I Amir.

The Gur-I Amir (meaning Tomb of the King) is the mausoleum of the great Central Asian conqueror Tamerlane (Timur). Built in the early 15th century (around 1403–1404), it was originally intended for Timur's grandson, Muhammad Sultan, but after Timur's death in 1405, he was also buried there.

The mausoleum is a masterpiece of Timurid architecture, featuring a striking azure dome, intricate tile work, and grand proportions that influenced later Mughal tombs in India, such as the Taj Mahal. Besides Timur, the mausoleum also houses the graves of his sons and grandsons, including Ulugh Beg, the famed astronomer and ruler.











## REGISTAN SQUARE



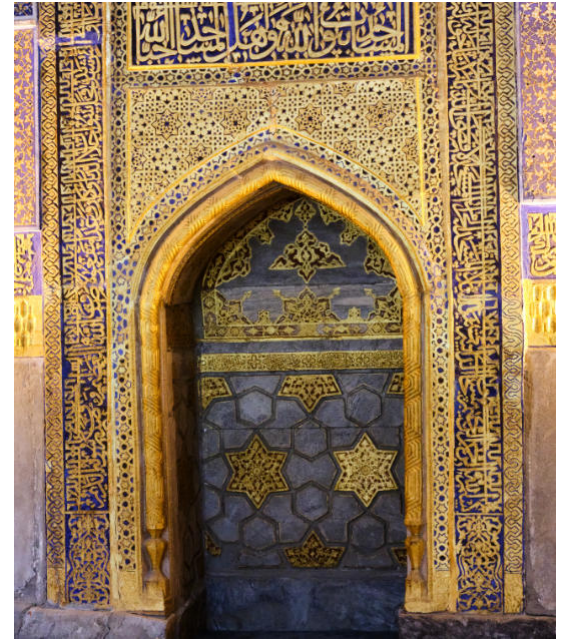
Registan Square is right in the centre of Samarkand, and it is one of the most famous historical sites in Central Asia. A long time ago it was just an open area where people gathered for public events — things like announcements, markets, and sometimes executions. The name “Registan” literally means “sandy place”.

The square started to become something more in the early 1400s. That is when Ulugh Beg, a ruler and scientist (and grandson of the conqueror Timur), built a madrasah — basically an Islamic school — on one side of the square and it became a major centre for learning at the time.

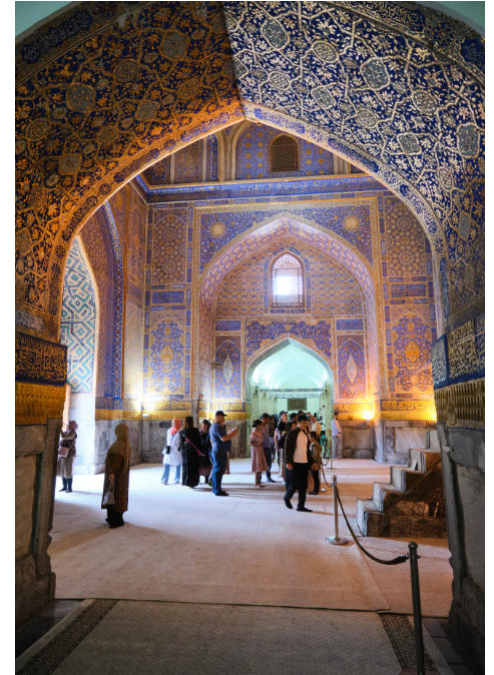
About 200 years later, two more big buildings were added. One was the Sher-Dor Madrasa, built to look similar to Ulugh Beg’s, but more decorative. It even has images of tigers on it, which is unusual for Islamic art. Then came the Tillya-Kari Madrasa, which served as both a school and a mosque. The inside is full of gold decoration, hence the name “Tillya-Kari” means “gold-covered.”

Over time, the buildings got damaged, but during the 20th century, especially under Soviet rule, there were efforts to restore them. Now, Registan is a major tourist attraction and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a key part of Samarkand’s identity and shows off the city’s long history as a cultural and learning centre.







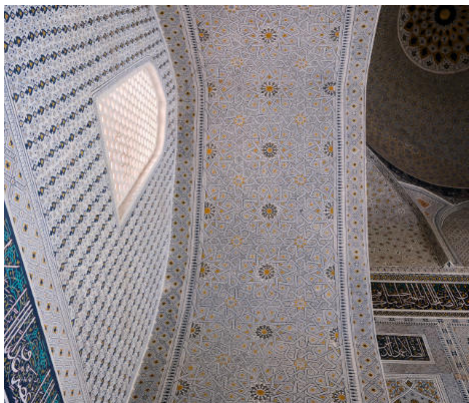
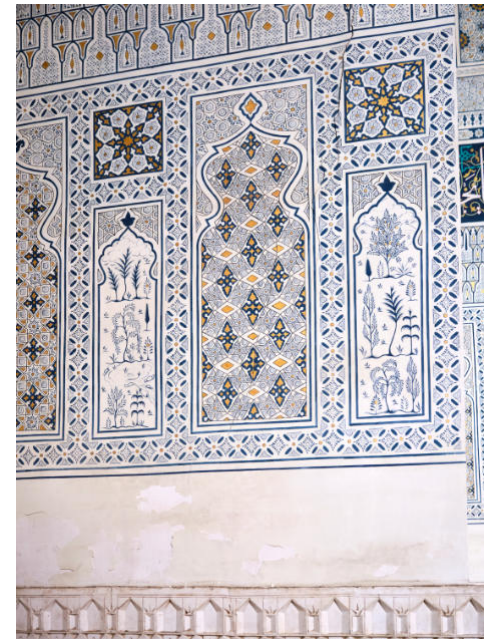
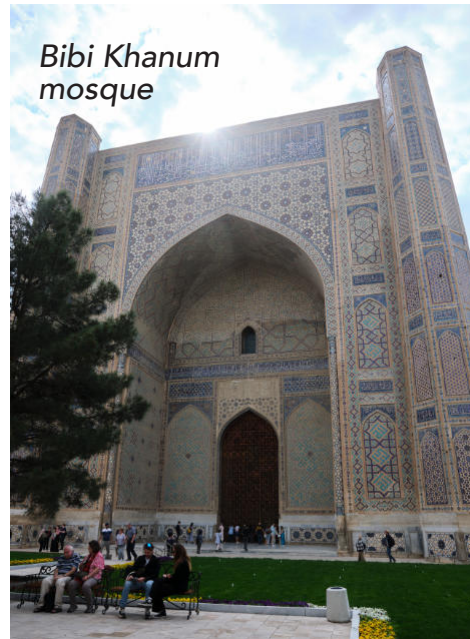


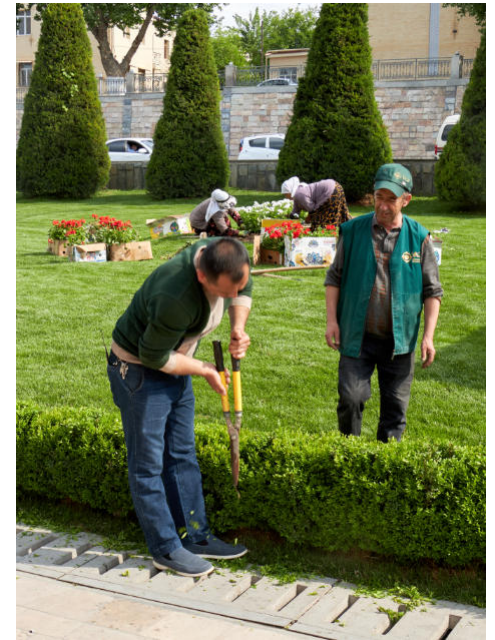


After a busy morning exploring, we headed a little out of the centre to a large family home which offered lunches in the central courtyard. As in many places we had far too much food for the 6 of us, the starting salad course would have been enough were we at home. We started with delicious salads with bread, followed by soup and then a huge platter of Plov, (the Uzbek national dish), with oceans of rice. Finally a small sweet treat and an ocean of green tea.



In the afternoon we headed back in to the centre and visited many of the ancient buildings around the Registan, before walking across to the huge, and very busy, necropolis.





## Shakhi Zinda Necropolis



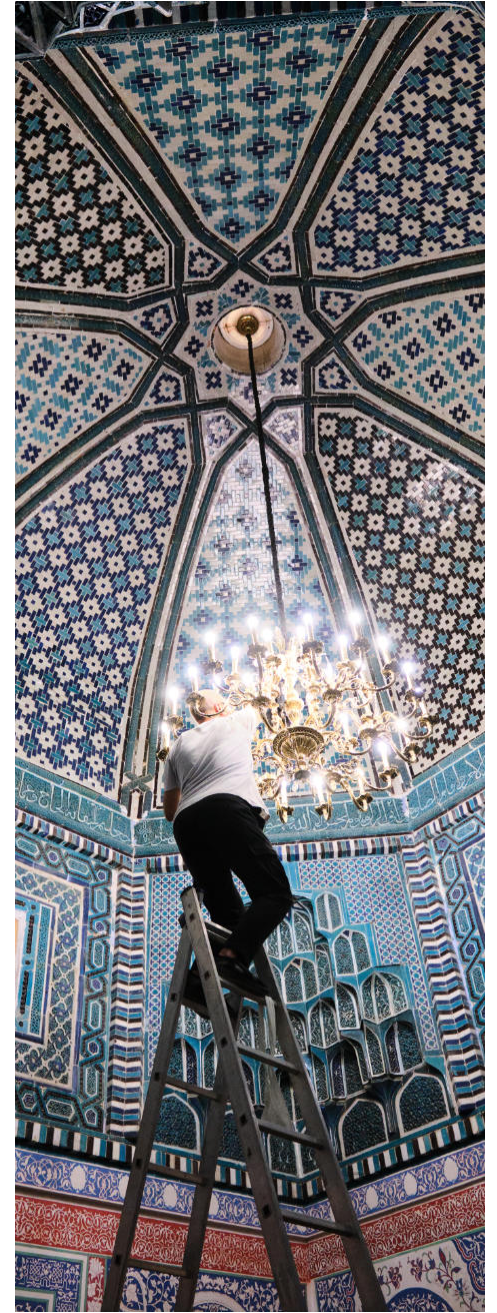
Just a short walk from Registan is the Shakhi Zinda necropolis complex. It is a long, narrow pathway lined with beautiful mausoleums with colourful tiles and intricate patterns.

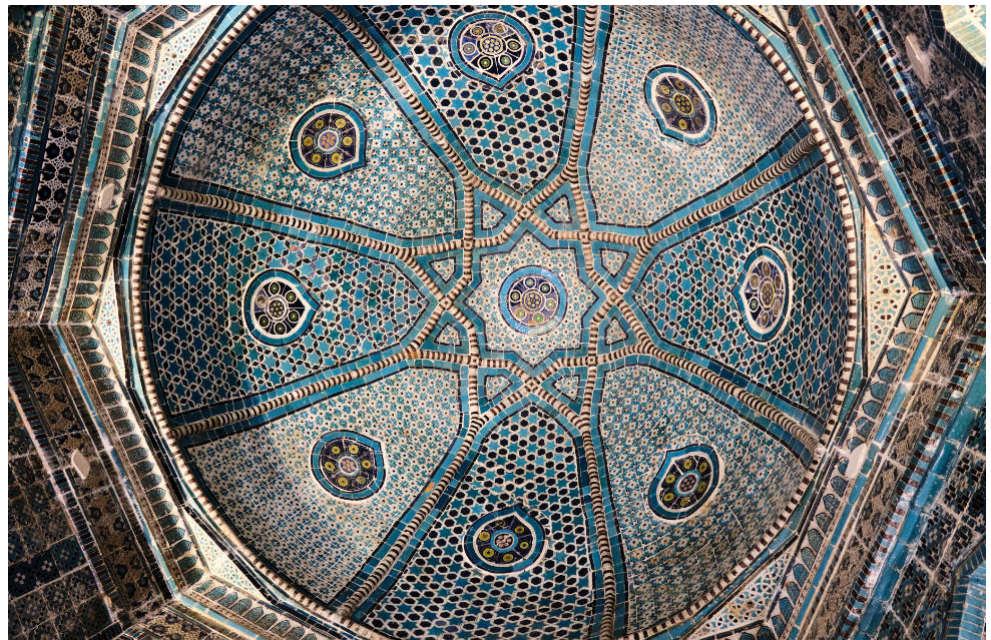
The name Shakhi Zinda means “The Living King”. It comes from a local legend that says Qusam Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet Muhammad, is buried there. According to the story, he came to spread Islam in the area in the 7th century and was killed, but some believe he didn’t actually die — he just disappeared into a secret underground chamber and is still

alive. That is where the “living king” idea comes from.

Most of the buildings were built in the 14th and 15th centuries, during the time of Timur and his successors. Members of the royal family, nobles, and important people were buried there, and each tomb is unique in its design.

The site fell into disrepair over time, but like Registan, it was restored in the 20th century.









After a long day exploring the ancient heart of Samarkand, the following morning we set out in two cars, rather than the coach, over the mountains to Shakhrisabz. Starting on city streets, then wide highways, we finally turned on to a twisty road which wound its way over the pass. We had brief stops on both the outwards and return journeys to stretch our legs and admire the views.

Our cars were the ubiquitous white Chrysler Salons which are produced in huge numbers in Uzbekistan. They were literally everywhere, perhaps only 1% were in other colours or even other makes.







On the return we stopped at a market at the very top of pass. Most of the stalls were selling dried yoghurt in various flavours, mostly used to make yoghurt drinks in the summer. We also saw lots of stalls all along the way selling rhubarb.



## SHAKHRISABZ

Shakhrisabz was the birth place of Tamerlane and as such contains the remains of several of his structures.

Ak-Saray was probably Timur's most ambitious project, 24 years in the making, following a successful campaign in Khorezm and the 'import' of many of its finest artisans. It is staggering trying to imagine what the rest of the palace was like, in size and glory.

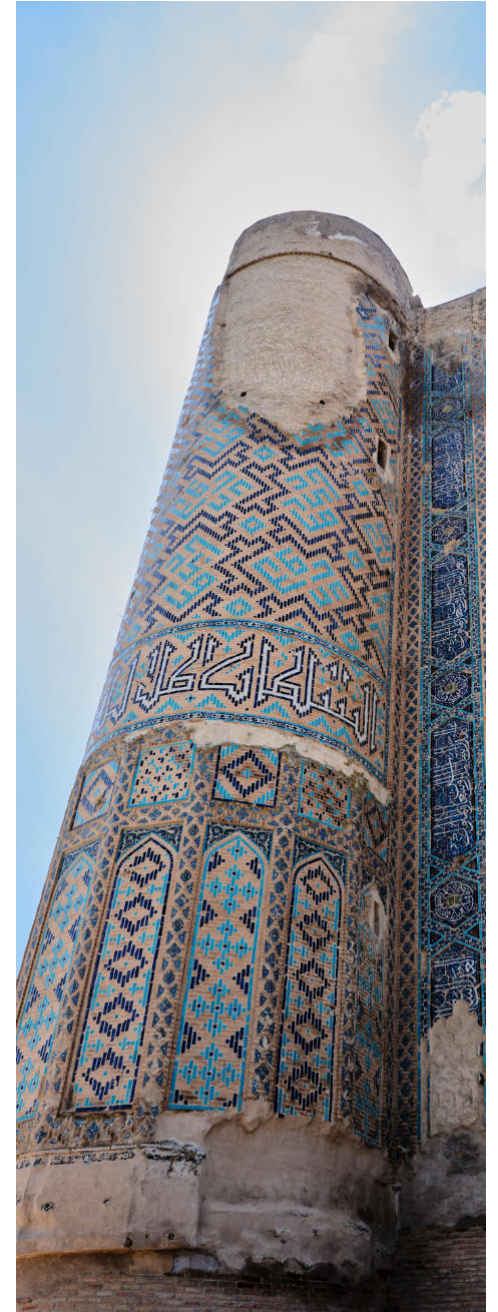
Envisaging the scale and might of this structure today requires a little imagination. In their attempt to wipe out memory of the Timurids, the Shaybanids destroyed many of the original structures, leaving just 38m of the central gateway intact, about half the original height. This may not sound a great deal, but it still rises dramatically above the surrounding parkland and is visible from quite a distance.

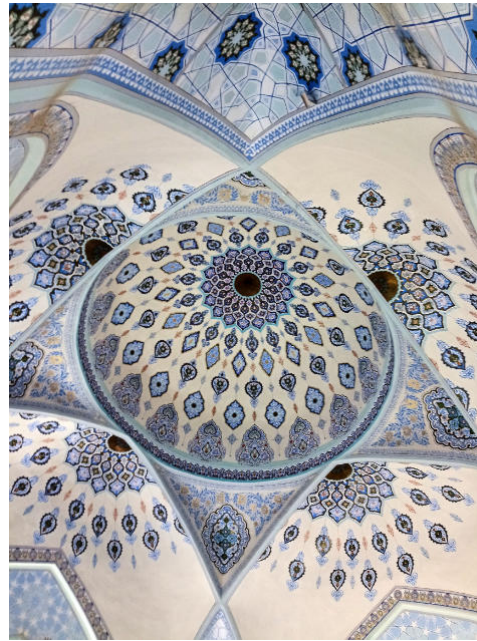
Unlike many of Uzbekistan's other historic sites, to date very little restoration work has been done here, and UNESCO's current project seems to focus, quite rightly, more on shoring up the building than touching up its magnificent (albeit time-ravaged) tile work. A small section of Shakhrisabz's mud-brick city walls has been preserved just behind the gateway. Originally at least 8m thick and 11m high, and broken up with a tower or archway every 50m, they must have been an imposing prospect for any would-be invader.

*"Let he who doubt  
our power and  
munificence look upon  
our buildings."*

Tamerlane









*Khazreti Imam Mosque*

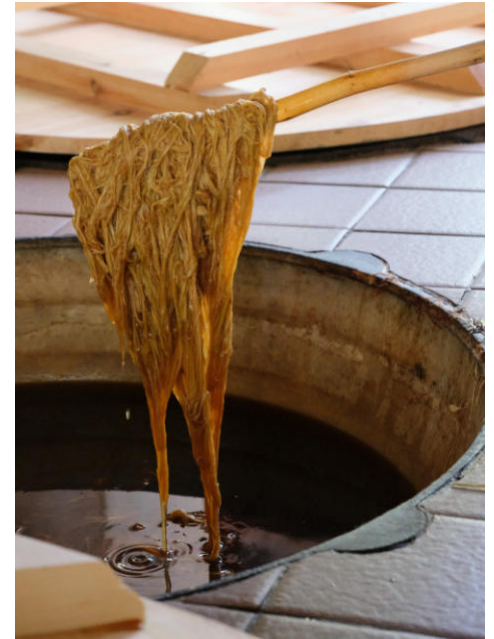


On our final day in Samarkand we started with a trip out to Konigil Meros Paper Factory and craft centre.

The Konigil Meros Paper Factory is a small, family-run place just outside of Samarkand where they make traditional silk (mulberry) paper by hand, using the same techniques that were used centuries ago. Silk paper, also known as Samarkand paper, was famous along the Silk Road for being strong and long-lasting. It is made from mulberry tree bark, a waste product of the food fed to Silk worms. The tour covers the whole process: peeling the bark, soaking it, pounding it into pulp, and drying the sheets by hand.

All the products use natural dyes and traditional tools, the water wheel driven ponding system looks particularly hair raising.

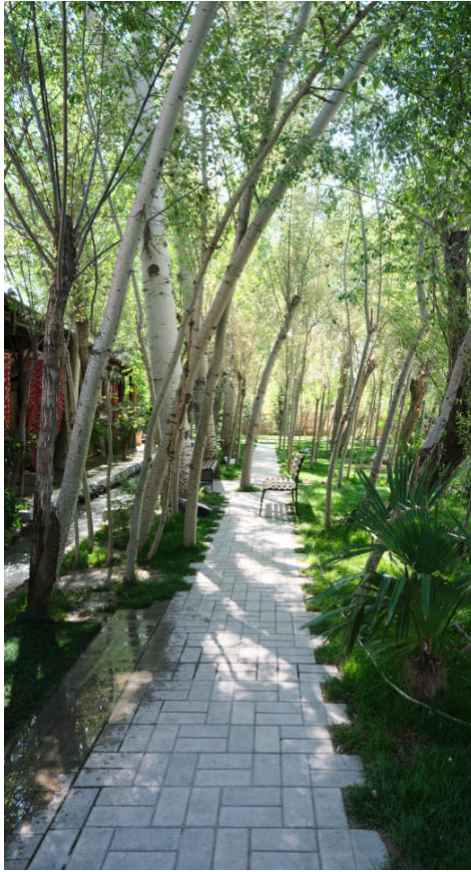
The whole site is shaded by trees with streams and water channels running through it to power the waterwheels.



## MEROS PAPER FACTORY









## THE ULUGH BEG OBSERVATORY

Our next stop was The Ulugh Beg Observatory, built in the early 1400s by Ulugh Beg, who was not just a ruler but also a serious scientist and mathematician. At a time when most leaders were focused on expanding empires, Ulugh Beg was studying the stars.

He built the observatory on a hill just outside the city, and it became one of the most advanced in the world at that time. The main feature was a giant underground sextant — a curved, stone instrument used to measure the position of stars. It was over 40 meters long and incredibly precise for its time. Using this observatory, Ulugh Beg and his team created a star catalog that listed the positions of over a thousand stars, and they calculated the length of the year with amazing accuracy — off by only about a minute compared to modern measurements.

Unfortunately, after Ulugh Beg was killed, the observatory was abandoned and forgotten for centuries. It was rediscovered in the early 1900s, and we visited the small museum and the remains of the original sextant.

The observatory gives a sense of how advanced science was in Samarkand back then — and how much value Ulugh Beg placed on knowledge, even in a time dominated by warfare and politics.



Afrasiab is the site of the ancient city of Samarkand, located just a bit north of the modern city. It was settled over 2,000 years ago and was a major centre along the Silk Road long before Timur came onto the scene. The city was eventually destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century, and over time it was buried under layers of earth — so what is left now is basically an archaeological site.

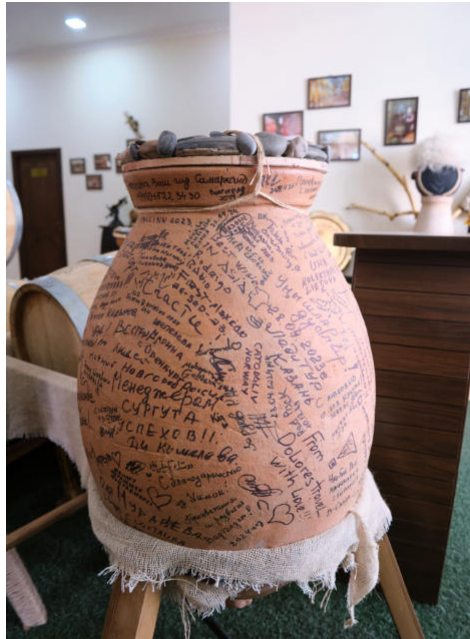
One of the most important finds from Afrasiab is a set of wall paintings (murals) dating back to the 7th century, during the time when Samarkand was ruled by the Sogdians, a local Persian-speaking people who were great traders and diplomats. These murals were discovered in a ruined palace and are now kept in the Afrasiab Museum, which is right next to the site.

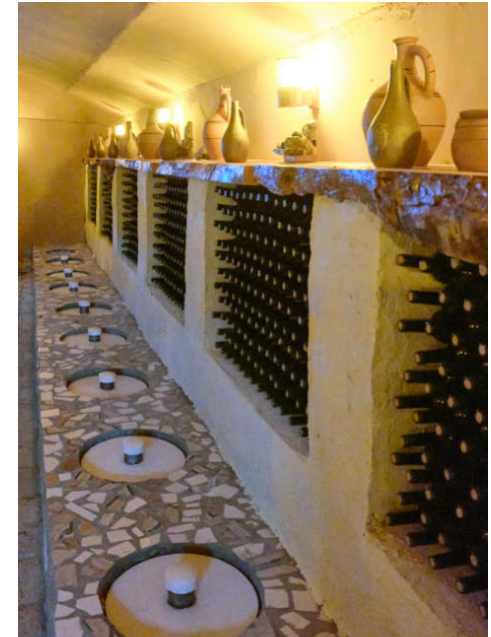
The murals are fascinating because they show scenes of diplomacy, culture, and life in early Samarkand. You can see ambassadors from different countries, religious rituals, royal processions, and even people riding elephants — evidence of the city's wide connections across Asia. The style is colourful and detailed, and while some parts are faded or damaged, what remains gives a rare glimpse into what life looked like over 1,300 years ago.

Today, Afrasiab itself is a quiet, open space with grassy hills and excavation spots, but the museum does a great job telling the story of what was once a thriving, multicultural city.





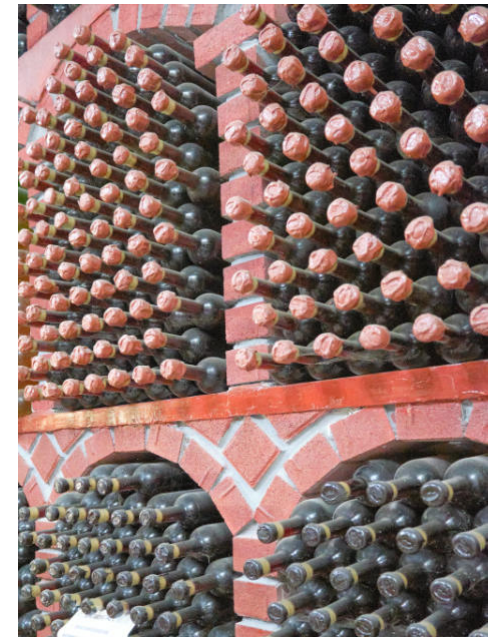




After lunch we headed out of the city to the Bagizagan winery.

What started as a simple grape processing plant for a Soviet co-operative has, since independence, grown into a large and modern winery employing over 700 people.

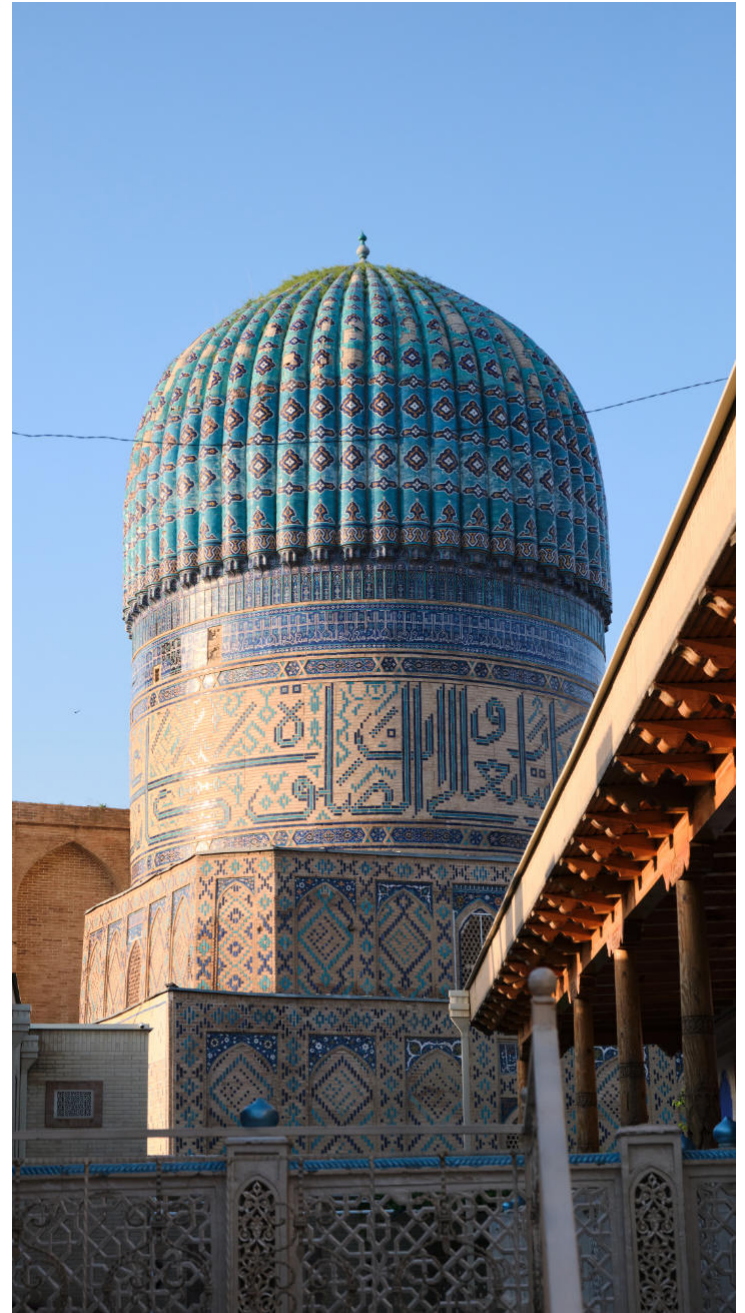
We had a tour of the barrel stores and were able to have a large tasting of the wines lead by a lovely gentleman who was the man in charge of the wine production. We were also able to try their "Cognac" which was really nice. We were able to purchase a bottle of the Cognac at the airport to bring home, (for special occasions), as it is not possible currently to purchase Bagizagan products in Europe as most of the production goes to the Far East.





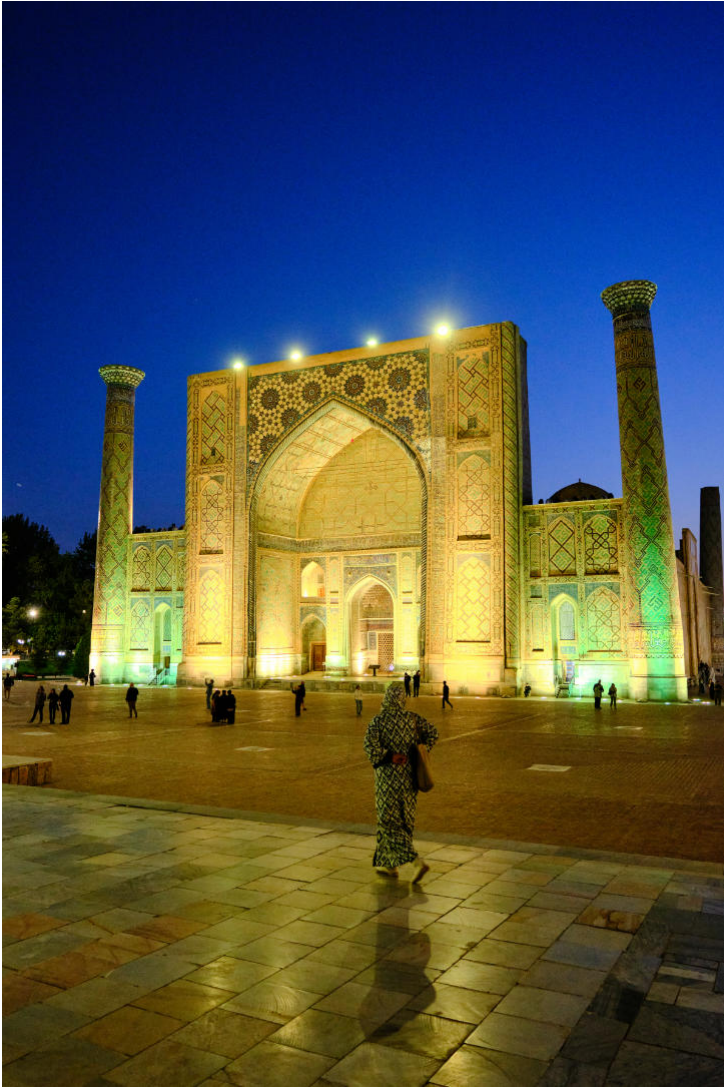
Heading back into the City, we spent some time exploring one of the many markets and wandering along the main tourist shopping streets as we waited for the sun to set to see Registan Square lit up. We even had an ice cream which both tasted really good despite the rather garish colours. Mohammed took us into a restaurant, ostensibly to look at the menu, but really to admire the view over the back of the square.









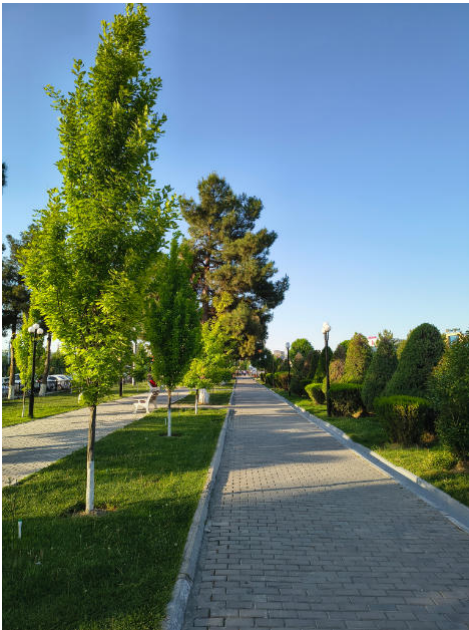


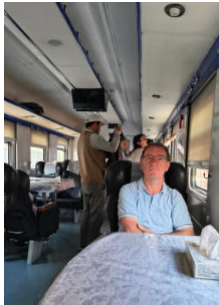
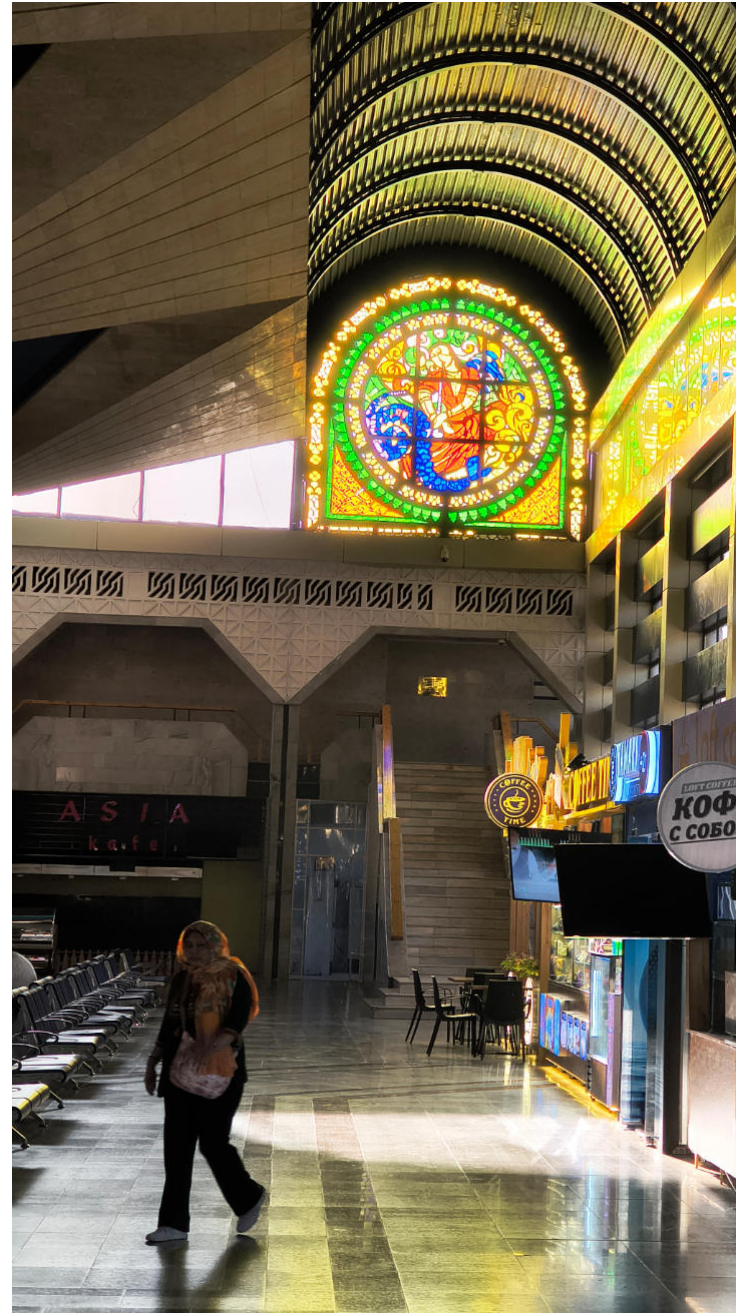


## TASHKENT AGAIN

In the morning we just had time for a walk around the park before catching the train back to Tashkent. Standing on the crowded platform we got talking to a Canadian lady, (originally from Australia), who was spending several months travelling through the "stans" on her own.

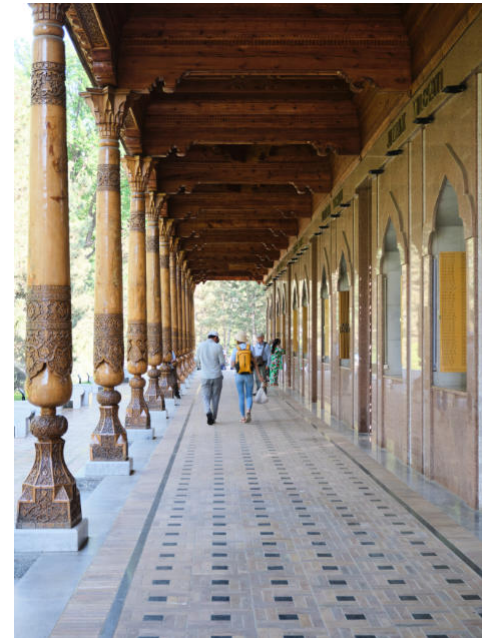
When the train arrived with Mohammed's help we found our carriage and settled down for the few hours it would take to get back to Tashkent.

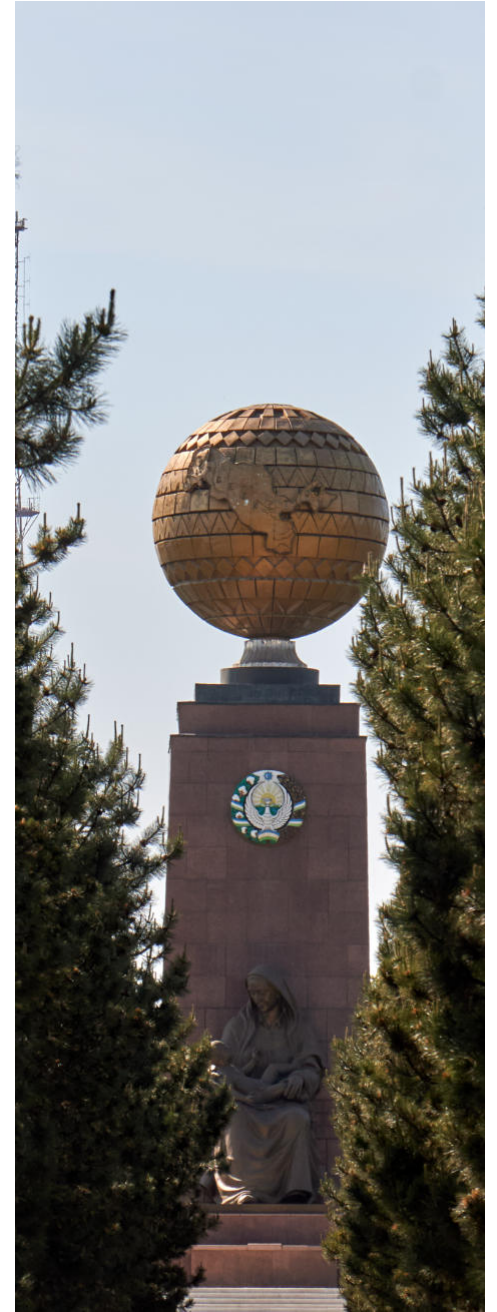




After arriving back in Tashkent and checking in to our hotel, we headed out to a few of the places still to see in Tashkent. The first stop was in the Independence Square to visit the 2nd World War memorial.

Memory and Honour Square is a quiet, respectful place in the centre of Tashkent, dedicated to the memory of Uzbek soldiers who died during World War II. At the heart of the square is the Monument of Mourning Mother, a bronze statue of a woman sitting with a calm, sorrowful expression. In front of her is an eternal flame, which burns in memory of the soldiers who never came home. Behind the statue is a long, arched gallery made of wood, engraved with the names of over 500,000 Uzbek soldiers who died in the war. It is a powerful reminder of how deeply the war affected the country.







For our final afternoon in Uzbekistan, we settled on a walk through the park near the hotel. It was then back to the hotel for packing, before heading out for our final dinner in a lovely restaurant a short distance away by car.

In the morning we took another walk in the park, before heading to the airport for the flight home and finally the coach back to Ilminster.







It is easy to be a millionaire in Uzbekistan. The biggest note shown above is the 100,000 is currently worth about £5.70.

## London Hotel

**Premier Inn London (Shepherds Bush Road)** Brook House, Hammersmith, W6 7AN

## Uzbek Hotels

**Lotte City Hotel Tashkent Palace**, Buyuk Turon Street 56, 100029, Tashkent

**Shaherezada Boutique Hotel**, Islom Hodja 35, 600200 Khiva,

**Hotel Shahrison**, Hakikat st 53, Bukhara, Bukhara Region

**Zarafshon Parkside Hotel**, Abdurakhmon Jomiy Street 65, 140100, Samarkand, Samarqand Region

## Tour

**Regent Holidays**, 6th Floor, Beacon Tower, Colston St, Bristol BS1 4XE

Agent Carl Meadows ,Carl.Meadows@regentholidays.co.uk

Guide Mr Muhammad Yunusov

## Others in our group

Carolyn COLLINS, Steven JACKSON and Ashwini NORONHA-JACKSON

