



Cities

of
sapphire



On a magic-carpet ride along the Silk Road, JENNIFER BYRNE finds the shining blue towers and vivid history of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan even more striking than the poets' promises.

Photography JOHN LAURIE

and gold

It's the journey, not the destination, I know. Sometimes, though, a place comes along that blows the rules out of the water, and that's how it was for me when I first saw a photograph of the unfinished minaret of Khiva, at the far western end of Uzbekistan's stretch of the ancient Silk Road.

There are other World Heritage sites en route, cities with taller towers, grander palaces, deeper histories. But this single image of a beautiful, barrel-shaped tower, built when Khiva was the centre of an empire, fired my imagination. I yearned to see it for myself.

Exactly 14 months later I stand at the foot of the Kalta Minor minaret – as glorious as any dream. Horizontal bands of turquoise, aqua and sapphire tiles, each more geometrically intricate than the last, rise into a bright blue sky. A golden light bounces off the high mud-brick walls nearby, standing on foundations dating back to the 10th century. But the city is older still; the mathematician and astronomer Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi invented algebra in his birthplace many centuries earlier (the title of his massive treatise includes the word *al-jabr*).

The shining minaret was commissioned not quite 200 years ago by Khiva's king to be the world's tallest Islamic tower, partly for his own glory, but also to keep a sharp eye on movements in the desert beyond the walls. But it's less than half its intended height of 70 metres, a dwarf by the standard of Uzbek towers, its flat top an indication of the day the khan dropped dead and his workers downed tools. His successor scampered back to the old palace, which offered greater security and more rooms for concubines.

A poem inscribed in mosaics runs around the top of Kalta Minor:

*This minaret was finished,
It reached the sky, it was so beautiful.
Even the trees in the heavens,
Were just a shadow of this minaret.*

There's a bit of an historical fudge on "finished", but the verse is true in essence.

Personal obsessions aside, travelling Uzbekistan's long stretch of the Silk Road is a bit like being in a long blue dream, such a dazzle of tiles and arches, and decorated domes and cupolas, it risks bringing on a Central Asian case of Stendhal syndrome. Uzbek guides joke about the four Ms: mosques, minarets, madrasahs and mausoleums. Museums makes five. It can be exhausting, but exhilarating, too, because the history is only part of the story.

This old country is also very young, reborn in 1991 from the ashes of the Soviet Union. The collapse was a profoundly traumatic event – and not the universally welcome one many in the West imagine. I meet older Uzbeks who still mourn for the days when they were part of the Russian empire, before the desperate decade of the '90s when they lost their industry, their currency, their capacity to feed themselves. "You can't eat cotton and oil," one old-timer says. "We starved." They had to rebuild their country from the ground up.

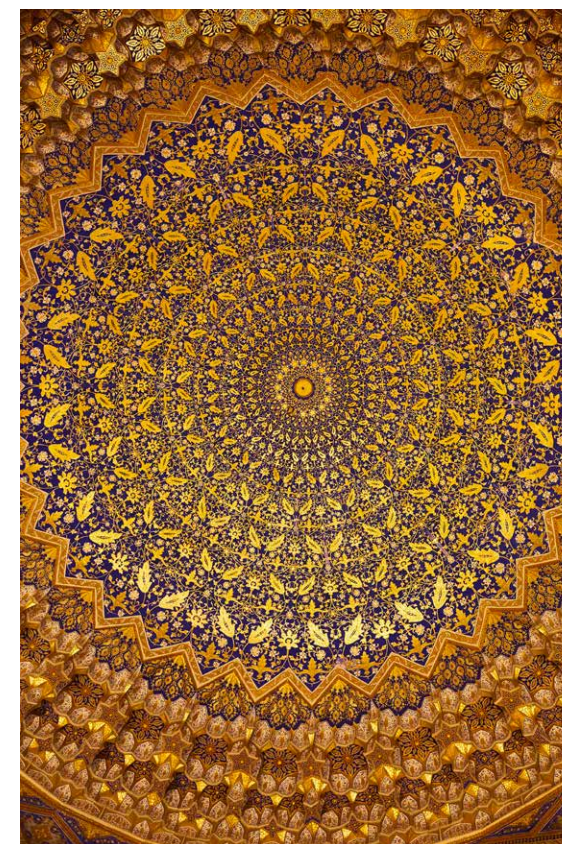
So this two-week journey is about more than the past. We visit the circus, and what a frolic that is. We bluff our way into the national sports training centre and meet the trainer who made Uzbekistan the sensation of the Rio Olympics, lifting the country out of nowhere to blitz the boxing medals; the place is full of boys training to become the next champions. We dance with grannies wearing Lurex and we're ambushed by schoolkids determined to practise their English. We eat the national dish of plov, join a wedding party, and sit among a weeping crowd beside the rose-covered body of the country's first president, and dictator, Islam Karimov, before he's dispatched to his mausoleum.

We also cross the border from Uzbekistan into Turkmenistan – a Le Carré-style operation – and see just how much marble you can afford if you're sitting on the world's fourth-largest gas reserve. And I ride on one of the descendants of the "heavenly horses", so admired by the Chinese that they packed up their silk and started a legendary trade route to acquire them.

Geographically, Uzbekistan is what they call a double-landlocked country – landlocked by 'stans that are themselves landlocked. It rubs along well enough with its giant northern neighbour, Kazakhstan (though Uzbeks do love a Borat joke), but its short southern border with Afghanistan is one of the world's most dangerous. It's fiercely guarded, against drugs mainly, but also Islamic extremism, which so alarms Uzbek authorities that even in this overwhelmingly Muslim ➤



PREVIOUS PAGES
Left: the minaret of Islam-Khodja in Khiva. Right: flatbread in Khiva. **OPPOSITE**
Clockwise from top: Kukeldash Madrasah in Tashkent; Siab Bazaar in Samarkand; the ceiling inside the dome of Tilla-Kari Madrasah in the Registan, Samarkand; Chorsu Bazaar in Tashkent.





country the burka is banned and there are no work breaks on Fridays for prayers.

But culturally it is extremely rich, luring travellers with its exotic, centuries-old stories of caravanserais filled with precious goods, and camel trains crossing the deserts, the traders building camps all along the route, which became trading posts, growing into fortified cities.

Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva are brilliant examples of these; the capital, Tashkent, not so much. Destroyed by an earthquake in the 1960s and rebuilt as a showcase for the best (and worst) of Soviet architecture, Tashkent has its charms: grand gardens, wide boulevards and, in the oldest part of the city, a modest but much-loved mausoleum built in the 16th century to honour the Muslim scholar and wise-man Kaffal-Shashi.

Across a vast square is a madrasah housing one of the country's great treasures: the world's oldest Koran, one of six commissioned by a 7th-century caliph to collate all versions of Muhammed's words shortly after he died. This is the last surviving copy, written in ink mixed from coal, walnut shells and pistachio blossoms. It's a beautiful, awe-inspiring thing. "Music for the eyes", as calligraphy master Bahodir Saliev describes it to us. He's a seventh-generation calligrapher, fluent in five languages, and he sends me away with a small treasure: a swirl of dots and lines reading "Jennifer" in Arabic.

Tashkent is also museum central and, as the first stop for most visitors, a useful primer to the region's history. This is fascinating but also fiendishly complex since pretty much everyone has stuck their oar in Central Asia, from Alexander the Great to Stalin. The standout monster of the 'stans seems to be Genghis Khan, who swept through with his infamous Mongol hordes in the 13th century, destroying everything they encountered. Mysteriously, his equally bloodthirsty successor, Tamerlane, is accorded the status of national hero.

This historical anomaly dates from the crucial year of 1991, when the Soviets withdrew from Uzbekistan but their hardman, the autocratic Islam Karimov, determinedly remained in office. He ordered the old busts of Marx and Lenin be replaced by outsized statues, one featuring the warlord king Tamerlane on horseback, bearing a sword, with his right leg (wounded during battle, hence his name: Timur-the-lame) still magnificently in action.

So what do Uzbeks learn at school about Tamerlane? Do they know he killed 17 million people and built towers from the skulls of his enemies?

Oh, yes, our guide – whose name is Timur – says cheerfully, we know about his brutal methods and the towers, but he united disparate lands and disparate people. This counts in Uzbekistan, with its mix of ➤

Heading west from Samarkand to Bukhara; roadside sellers at the entrance to Samarkand. Opposite: Uzbekistan's national dish, plov, served traditionally with freshly baked bread and tomatoes.



100 or so ethnicities, among them Russians (Russian is the lingua franca) and Tajiks and Koreans and Iranians and Arabs and Tartars, many of them with the wide cheeks and square faces inherited from the original Mongol invasion. This is one of the most perpetually occupied parts of the world, where half a dozen religions have taken root over the centuries.

Travelling the length of the Silk Road you can see how the history unfolded, how the cities rose and fell. We leave Tashkent by high-speed train, zooming past rocky dunes and dusty fields rimed by salt to reach the near-mythical city of Samarkand; at its medieval heart is the Registan, which viceroy of India George Curzon described as “the noblest public square in the world”. The most spectacular sight in Central Asia, some say, and who would argue?

The Registan is a vast open-air plaza framed by three madrasahs, covered to within an inch of their towering, tilting heights with mosaic tiles and majolica – sheets of blue and gold, earth to sky. I spend hours here, bewitched, until a guard “pssts” at me and points to a rickety set of wooden stairs leading to the top of what’s known (because of the tilt) as “the drunken minaret”. I climb, cautiously, and I’m rewarded with a panoramic view of the old city and the desert beyond.

Samarkand was the centre of Tamerlane’s empire, built on his own giant scale. Some two kilometres from the Registan is the Gure Amir mausoleum, where his body lies beneath a solid block of green jade surrounded by statues and arches that light up spectrally at night. Guides here whisper about the curse of Tamerlane. Legend has it that when Stalin ordered the grave to be opened, in 1941, archaeologists found an inscription inside: “Whosoever disturbs my tomb will unleash an invader more terrible than I”. Three days later, Hitler ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union. Stalin ordered the body to be reinterred with full Islamic ritual the following year.

Then there’s the observatory built by Tamerlane’s grandson Ulugh Beg, a bad ruler but brilliant geek, who constructed a massive sextant with which he located more than a thousand stars; his globe of the heavens was so precise it astounded Oxford scholars of his day. Though for sheer loveliness, nothing beats the colour and intricate mosaics of the peaceful necropolis Shah-i-Zinda, built on a high green hill looking over the city, filled with tombs for Tamerlane’s wives and relatives. A place so holy that a visit here is regarded by some as equivalent to a pilgrimage to Mecca.

At lunch we join Uzbek men at the traditional Samarkand teahouses called chaikhana for simple meals of kebabs and salad served on bright plastic cloths. At dinner we join parties at barn-like restaurants where three generations gather to feast



Above, from left: Bukhara’s Ark Fortress; Po-i-Kalyan mosque complex, which includes the Kalyan minaret; and a local at Bolo Hauz – the Emir’s Mosque.

on chicken, mutton and noodles, and dance. It’s in Samarkand, too, that we try plov, the traditional dish of Uzbekistan: a one-pot rice stew studded with vegetables and fatty lamb, served with sweet local tomatoes and freshly baked bread.

Direct communication isn’t easy but the welcome is unmistakably warm at these gatherings, with big golden smiles from older Uzbeks who during the hard years invested their gold in teeth. The women wear headscarves and bright velvet tunics, the men, skullcaps and boots. Life is hard – one can see that – and the winding road from Samarkand to Tamerlane’s birthplace of Shahrisabz, two hours’ drive south, takes us past a roadside market selling little more than herbal teas, dried fruit and sour-milk balls.

On the way to Bukhara we pass the industrial zone of Karshi, a gas and oil production centre expanding across the desert at cracking speed, heralded by the smell of gas and the sight of blue pipes snaking towards an enormous power station in the distance. The desert is fringed, incongruously, by green fields of cotton,



Uzbekistan’s chief cash crop – in fact, the cotton boll is a national symbol. But lines of salt show the cost of such a thirsty choice. Wheat is the favoured crop these days – something you can eat.

If Samarkand is the glamour girl of the old trade route, Bukhara, some 280 kilometres to the west, is its gentle, modest sister. A maze of a city-museum, it was founded in the 6th century, though its history as a centre of scholarship, culture and trade stretches back centuries before that. It’s the best place to buy embroidered jackets, shawls, heavy falls of old Russian silk and wonderful hats from traders who’ve set up shops under the arches of ancient caravanserais, where the camels slept.

Those were the days when a soldier or priest would climb the 45-metre spiral staircase (that’s 105 steps – I counted) to the top of the glowing Kalyan minaret to light a signal fire every night to guide travellers. They would enter through iron gates guarding the massive 4th-century Ark Fortress; just beyond is the khan’s vast open-air arena, looking like something

straight from *Game of Thrones*, and the cells where prisoners spent their last, miserable night before being executed in public.

Bukhara has its fair share of magnificent blue monuments to visit, but it’s the kind of dreamy, jewel-like place that rewards the aimless wanderer. I make nodding acquaintance with the men playing backgammon just outside our hotel, their board set up in the shade of plane and beech trees, and I chat with workers restoring a 16th-century mosque – an endless job, they complain amiably. I buy a pretty necklace from the women who run the bustling gold market and one of the city’s famous hand-embroidered jackets. From our guide, I learn a few of the secrets and traditions of old Bukhara, such as the code of the doors: a woman caller knocks gently on the wood; a man rattles the chain.

And it’s in Bukhara we discover the circus, a travelling show managed by Shirin – meaning sweet in Uzbek – who tells me she’s just lost her husband and performance partner of 43 years, a magician named Farkat. Their act had been the retelling of a 15th-century Persian love story renamed – what else? – *Farkat and* ➤



Shirin. She speaks lovingly of her husband, but looks to the future; many young people want to join the circus, she says.

We sit in the bleachers watching children stream in, past barkers spinning sticks of old-fashioned fairy floss in metal pots. The audience is pulsing with energy and anticipation. It's both a privilege and a visceral pleasure to be here, under the faded yellow and blue canvas top, at a circus that reminds me so of what it was like to go as a young, wide-eyed girl.

The third of the beautiful sisters is Khiva, a seven-hour drive west. It's the smallest of Uzbekistan's Silk Road cities, circled entirely by the desert that defines its character: sand-coloured, sun-baked, immensely hospitable. Home not just to that unfinished minaret I'd so longed to see, but to the mighty fortress of Itchan Kala, with thick mud-brick walls curving like protective waves.

Though first recorded by Muslim travellers during the 10th century, Khiva's glory days were in the 16th, as capital of its own khanate stretching to the Caspian Sea. Now it's a living open-air museum, packed with richly painted madrasahs and palaces. Its narrow lanes are full of music, markets and noisy weddings; travellers are encouraged to join in the dancing and try on furry hats made of astrakhan wool.

I could spent weeks in Khiva, lounging in its tea rooms and bars, but this is our last stop, where the old Silk Road turns south into the neighbouring nation of Turkmenistan. We're dropped by taxi at a dusty, tightly fenced border crossing where we're greeted by guards, dogs, lots of stamping of documents and much searching of luggage.

The next few days are a blur of ancient sites – unlike Uzbekistan, which enhances monuments shamelessly, Turkmen authorities believe they should generally be left in their unrestored state. The depth of the history in this huge nation of just five million people, many of them tribal nomads, is staggering – though harder to read. And it's impossible not to be distracted by Ashgabat, the blazing white-marble capital city of towers rising from the desert.

This is a country rich from gas and, like Uzbekistan, it was ruled for many years by one of the old Communist Party dinosaurs turned nationalist president. From 1985 until his unlamented death in 2006, Saparmurat Niyazov's rule was as repressive as it was eccentric. The capital was littered with golden statues of Turkmenbashi, as he called himself, and he renamed some of the months in honour of his family.

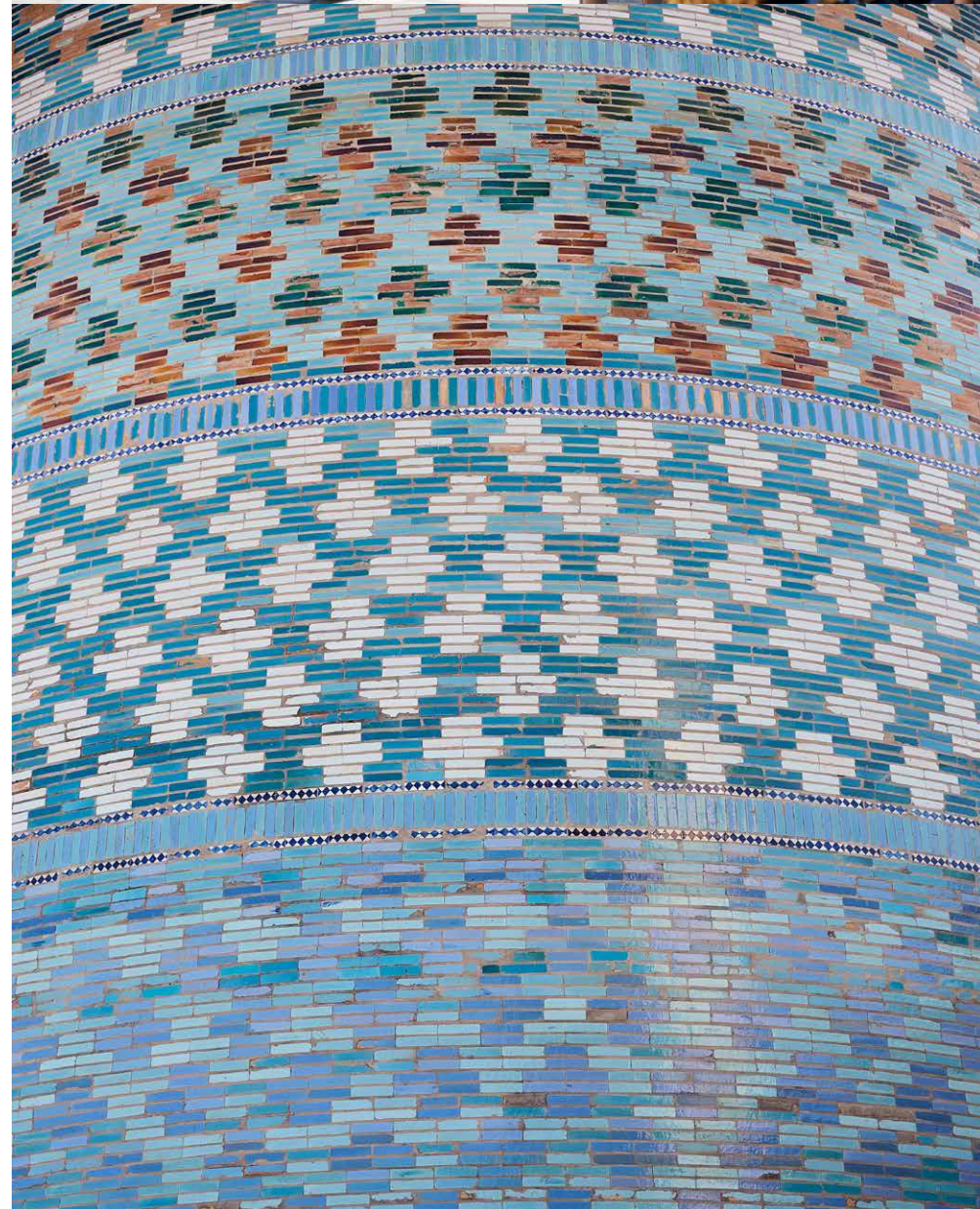
Beyond Turkmenbashi's monuments, though, the landscape is ancient and powerful – high on a hill above the capital's thrusting white apartment blocks and eight-lane highways are the bones and bricks of an ancient city. Archaeologists digging at Old Nisa, some



Above: carp with tomatoes, flatbreads, smoked cheese, tea and vodka. **Opposite from top:** a market in Khiva; a section of Kalta Minor minaret in Khiva.

20 kilometres from Ashgabat, have discovered fire temples surrounded by niches decorated with symbols of Zoroastrianism, the old faith here but honoured by Islam, the dominant religion that followed. A tour of Turkmenistan's major heritage sights – Mary, Kunya-Urgench and the ancient city of Merv – involves travelling to three of the country's five provinces; all have grandish capitals, but nothing to beat Ashgabat, which is clearly where the money is, and the power.

The Silk Road is a glorious misnomer. A series of routes snaking across Asia and Europe, shape-shifting with history. and so vast it's hard to imagine what any stretch of it might look like. Now I see it in shades of blue, from the sapphire tiles of the Registan to the cloudless azure sky over the western desert. And that shining barrel-shaped minaret in Khiva, as beautiful as I'd hoped, and the old poem promised. ●



Trip notes

Getting around

Abercrombie & Kent has a range of hosted small-group tours and customised journeys to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Its 15-day Ancient Trade Routes of Central Asia, a hosted small-group tour, has departures in October 2017 and May, September and October 2018. It's priced from \$11,995 per person twin share (single supplement \$2,495), which includes extensive touring with English-speaking guides, the services of an A&K host, most meals, and all accommodation and transport, including regional flights and a high-speed train from Tashkent to Samarkand. An eight-day private journey costs from \$7,715 per person twin share. 1300 590 317, abercrombiekent.com.au **Visas** Australians require visas for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. A&K helps guests with applications and recommends allowing at least three months for processing.

Getting there

Emirates-Qantas codesharing with Uzbekistan Airways flies from select Australian cities to Tashkent via Dubai.