

UZBEKISTAN: FOLLOWING THE GREAT SILK ROUTE

Uzbekistan is an exciting and unspoiled country, which has yet to be discovered by mass tourism and therein lies a great deal of its charm. Located on the ancient Route of Silk, within its borders are Bukhara, Khiva, Shahrissabz and, of course, the incomparable Samarkand, which now forms a part of UNESCO's List of World Heritage cities. This Route originated in the Orient: China, India, Iran, and extended throughout Eastern Europe. Consequently, the history of this land and its earliest inhabitants date back more than 2,500 years, despite the fact that Uzbekistan itself is a relatively new republic that came into existence in December of 1991, when many of the states of the old Soviet Union gained their independence.

Totally landlocked, Uzbekistan is surrounded by Kazakhstan to the north, Kirghizstan and Tajikistan to the east, Afghanistan to the south and Turkmenistan to the west. Its unique geographic location, which might sound like a bit of a tongue-twister, and the vicissitudes of its turbulent history, with successive occupations of Chinese, Russians, Mongols, Arabs... and finally Russians, make for a fascinating visit. Even Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan left their respective marks on the Uzbek territory.

More influential still on Uzbek history was, of course, Timur or Tamerlane, a name one will hear repeatedly throughout a visit to the country, for this leader was responsible for the country's epoch of greatest splendor. Tamerlane emerged from the internal confrontations as the leader of Mawarannahr in the 1380s and from there he moved on to occupy large parts of Central and Western Asia and the southern steppe region north of the Aral Sea. He even dared to invade Russia and India, before he died in 1405, during his attempt to occupy China.



Not only was Tamerlane an important military leader, but he also enriched the life of the people and encouraged craftsmen and scholars to settle in the regions he conquered. He was a devout patron of the arts and at the same time enthusiastically encouraged the rudimentary medical and scientific research of the day. In fact, we can still visit the impressive astronomical observatory of his grandson, Ulugh Bega, a brilliant scientist of the time, built in 1420.

Soon after his death, his kingdom was split into two parts and eventually the constant fighting and upheaval led to the rapid demise of this once great empire. At the beginning of the 16th century, the Uzbek nomad tribes roamed the lands and ruled Uzbekistan until it became part of the Russian Empire three centuries later.

Today approximately 27 million inhabitants live in its 447,400 km², 95% of whom are Moslems, mostly Sunnites and not fundamentalists, although Catholicism, Judaism and other religions are also freely practiced. Aside from its natural resources, such as oil, gas and agricultural produce, probably part of its wealth lies in the warm, friendly, open nature of the Uzbek people, who enhance the charm of this country's colorful historic and touristic heritage.



The route to follow: Begin at the capital, Tashkent, with its international airport, where one can visit the Kukeldash Madrasah and a number of interesting museums in the city including that of Applied Arts.

In all truth, visitors should be advised that road travel in Uzbekistan is slow and arduous, but on the upside it is also extremely colorful. Furthermore, finding sufficient rest stops along the way can also be a little challenging. Therefore it is a good idea to fly from Tashkent to the city of Khiva, via Urgench, approximately 750 kms away. Khiva together with Bukhara and the extraordinary city of Samarkand form the Great Oriental Triangle and give us an excellent idea of the extraordinary wealth and splendor which this region enjoyed in the Middle Ages.



Khiva boasts of an impressive architectonic complex that will indeed sweep visitors off their feet... that is, until they arrive at Samarkand. Khiva's famous Kenya Ark Citadel was the fortress and residence of the governors of Khiva. It dates back to the 12th

century and its turquoise blue Kalta Minor Minaret stands out. The Juma Mosque and its minaret were put up in the 10th century and it is still impressive even though only 112 of its original 212 columns are still standing in its main hall. The Mausoleum of the poet Pahlavan Mahmud, with its blue-tiled dome, is one of the most remarkable monuments in the city and the walls are inscribed in their entirety with the poet's most significant patriotic writings. Another important Mausoleum in the city is that of Said Allauddin, constructed in 1310, when the city was under Mongol rule.

It is certainly worth visiting the Islamic Khogia Madrasah (Madrasah means "school"), one of the newer monuments of the city, built at the end of the 19th century, for visitors can climb up the 118 steps of its minaret to obtain a spectacular view of the city and the surrounding Kharakum desert.

The city tour can be completed with a visit to the Palace of one of the countries cruelest dictators, Tosh Khovil. Known as the House of Stone, it was constructed between 1832 and 1841, to accommodate him and his apparently extensive harem, for it is made up of 150 rooms, distributed around 9 interior patios.

It is an easier and scenic drive to Bukhara, one of the key cities on the Silk Route, together with Samarkand, to see the Magori Attori Mosque, built in the year 937. Although a fire destroyed a good part of its structure in the 12th century, it was skillfully rebuilt soon after. Construction on yet another mosque, the Kalian temple was completed in 1514, according to an inscription on the façade. The Mausoleum of Ismael Samni, founder of the Samanide dynasty, was built in 902 and it is the oldest landmark in the city, along with the El Ark citadel, which was the residence of the Emirs of Bukhara. They occupied it from the 5th century until the year 1920, when it was bombarded by the Russian army and the imperial family was forced to flee. Ali Khan was the last emperor to be crowned there in 1910. The Kalian minaret is said to be the highest historical monument in Central Asia and it is also known as the "Tower of Death", because, according to legend, criminals and unfaithful wives were dragged up the tower steps to the very top and then pushed to their death.

Another pleasant drive will take us to Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia and, in the 14th century, it was actually the capital of the entire Islamic Empire. A visit to the Plaza de Registan with its three important Madrasahs is indeed an experience to remember for a lifetime: Ulugbek, Tillya-kori and Sher-Dor are the names in clockwise order of these immensely beautiful structures. The Bibi Khanyam Mosque, to the north of the Square was completed shortly before Tamerlane's death, and it was at one time one of the largest mosques in the world. The center of public life in the Middle Ages, this enormous plaza was restored in 1920, but without losing any of its original and imposing charm. Not to be missed is its spectacular sound and light presentation in the evening.

An excursion should also be made from Samarkand to Shakhrisabs, to the South of the city, which was the birthplace of Timur. Even though a large part of the city was destroyed by the emir of Bukhara, Abdullah Khan II. in the 16th century, it is still possible to see the Ark Saray Palace, the Kum Gumbaz Saidan, the Khazrati Iman Mosque and the Mausoleum of Timur's son, Jahangir.



And finally, the only word you really need to know in Uzbek is: “*Svarista*”. You will find yourself repeating it all the time, because it means: *Thank you!*

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What to eat: Every meal begins with a delicious soup, followed by an array of enticing appetizers and then a main dish, which could include the popular *och*, a rice platter with sautéed lamb, the *chachlik*, shish kebab or brochettes, with different chunks of meat, including the ubiquitous lamb. Wine is available and even though the local Uzbek produce will probably not satisfy connoisseurs, the beer is very good. Green tea is also popular and don’t miss the tasty yogurt served at the end of each meal.

Where to stay: The Hotel Asia Chain offers excellent accommodations in the cities of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand.

What to buy: Silk, of course, pashminas and a wide array of handicrafts

Currency: The soum.

How to get there: Turkish Airlines flies through Istanbul. It is also possible to check out guided tours through the Politours agency in Spain.

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