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[ EXPERIENCES ]

# FIFTY SHADES OF BLUE

*A trip through some of the most beautiful cities along Uzbekistan's stretch of the Silk Road showcases the contrast between ancient and modern, as Laura Millar finds on a tour of the largest Central Asian country*

**4,653**

Height in metres of Pik Gissar

**-40°C**

Lowest winter temperatures in Uzbekistan

**6H50M**

Flight time from London to Tashkent

**I'M GAZING UP** in awe at an imposing, circular tower, which sort of resembles a massive chimney, ringed with bands of turquoise, teal and azure majolica tiles arranged in different geometric patterns. Dominating the skyline, it stands in a courtyard just off one of the main thoroughfares of the old city of Khiva, in south-central Uzbekistan, formerly a bustling trade centre and an important stop along the Silk Road.

As I crane my head upwards, where the tower's flattened top blocks out the sun, I'm surprised – and amused – to hear my guide, Ines, tell me that it's actually known as the Short Tower. It is, in fact, an unfinished minaret, whose construction was originally decreed in 1852 by Khiva's then-ruler, Muhammad Amin Khan. >

Words by LAURA MILLAR

📷 Guenter Guni

**TILE STYLE:** A shot of the portal of Ulugh Beg Madressa, located at Registan Square in the city of Samarkand and constructed in the 15th century





**SET PIECE:** [left] The sun sets on the Kalyan Minaret and Miri Arab Madressa in Bukhara

selection of massive furry hats; some are made from sheepskin, some from various furs, including fox and mink (don't tell PETA), and some from astrakhan - the tightly curled black or grey pelts of just-born karakul lambs (again, *really* don't tell PETA).

"Thick, warm hats were commonly worn by everyone, from peasants to kings," explains Ines, "but the curlier the fur, the more expensive it was. So a king's hat would be made entirely from astrakhan, studded with precious stones and feathers, and be 50cm tall." Fancy. And despite being a bit of a tourist gimmick, they're still worn by locals to protect against the vicious winters, which here can see drops in temperature down below freezing to -20 or -30°C.

They're not needed today, however, in the balmy September sunshine. As the gentle light diffuses around the honey-hued walls on my walk around this charming ancient citadel, I'm also struck by how very clean and, well, new-looking everything is. This has been a bit of a theme throughout my seven-day trip to Uzbekistan, which started with my observation of the almost military-style teams of street cleaners in the distinctly modern capital, Tashkent, who are out daily at sunrise, sweeping the pavements free of any speck of litter. "The whole country is super-clean because big state companies ensure everything is kept spotless," explained Marat, the guide accompanying my tour group for the whole journey. "Workers also look after public gardens, and plant flowers to line the highways." I was also surprised to occasionally spot individual workmen around major monuments, touching up fading paintwork or repairing broken tiles. But as a result of their meticulous efforts, extraordinary structures, such as Khiva's

hued mosques, minarets and madrasas, testament to its status as part of a Muslim country (although today Uzbekistan is run as a secular state). While Khiva's overall population is around 93,000, just 2,000 people live within the old city walls, which were originally constructed from clay and straw and are renovated in the same way every couple of decades. A sculpture of a man leading a caravan of camels, representing the traders who would have stopped off here to sell their wares, adorns one part of the wall just by the western gate, and once through it, I feel as if I've stepped back a few hundred years.

Today, modern-day merchants line the street, which runs, arrow-straight, right through the old town, selling mainly souvenirs and artisanal products, rather than the silks and spices they would have done centuries ago. These include a fabulous

> Similar to many rulers with delusions of grandeur, Khan wanted it to be built high enough that you could see the city of Bukhara from the top, and expected it to reach around 90 to 100 metres. "The only small snag in his ambitious plan," laughs Ines, "was that Bukhara is 300 miles away from Khiva, so his wish was never going to come true, no matter how tall the tower got." Nonetheless, the hapless architect chosen to try and make it happen did his best, and over the next couple of years, it rose to the still-impressive height of 29 metres. Unfortunately, at that stage he got wind of the fact that Khan planned to execute him after the job was finished, so that he could never make anything so beautiful for anyone else. As anyone with any sense would do, he made a run for it - but was, unfortunately, captured. With an exquisite sense of timing, however, Khan chose that same year to start a war with Iran, where he was killed in battle. So the architect lived; but, perhaps understandably, didn't bother finishing it.

This striking remnant of Khan's folly is just one of many incredible monuments scattered around Khiva, which was first established over 2,500 years ago. In common with Uzbekistan's other Silk Road cities, it's brimming with historic, vividly blue-

## UZBEKISTAN IS BRIMMING WITH HISTORIC, VIVIDLY BLUE-HUED MOSQUES, MINARETS AND MADRASAS, TESTAMENT TO ITS STATUS AS PART OF A MUSLIM COUNTRY

10th century Juma Mosque, whose ceiling is supported by over 200 original pillars made of elaborately carved wood, look incredibly well-preserved, while the vivid, exquisitely-hand-painted decorations on the walls, tiles and ceilings of the striking Toshhovli Palace, home to Amin Khan's predecessor, seem just as vibrant as they would have been when the Palace was constructed in 1832.

There is, overall, a subtle sense of pride by Uzbeks in their imposing country, which sprawls almost 500,000 square kilometres and is encircled by Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and **Kyrgyzstan**. Most of us will be familiar with it, if at all, either because of its Silk Road associations, or some vague perception of it as an oil- and gas-rich region. Let's start with its past; it became part of the Silk Road - the 6,500km trade route (which was actually a series of different routes,

**Kyrgyzstan** is one of the most mountainous countries in the world with over 80% of its landmass covered in mountain ranges; the majority of them are party of the Tian Shan

not just one long, unbroken one) which connected China to the Middle East and Europe - around the 1st century BC. Its prime location on the main crossing route led to the evolution of some of its most important cities, including Bukhara and Samarkand (both now Unesco heritage sites). Together with Tashkent and Khiva, these remain the destinations most tourists head to - although Khiva less so, as it's smaller and therefore less well-known to the masses, and definitely the place to get your #ihavethisthingwithtiles fix without having to fight through hordes of Instagrammers. And Instagrammers aplenty you will encounter here, largely women who have hired traditional dresses (think long, floaty and silky) and end up posing gracefully on the vast square outside the turquoise-domed Tillya Sheikh mosque in Tashkent, or in the elaborate doorway of the city's Barak Khan madrasa, or on the wall outside the imposing entrance to the Mir-I-Arab madrasa in Bukhara.

Uzbekistan's Islamic architecture is indeed the kind of backdrop you'd want for your socials, but spending time inside some of these beautiful buildings is well worth it, too. Perhaps my favourite is the

## INSIDE, THE MAUSOLEUM IS LAVISHED IN GOLD, COBALT BLUE AND TURQUOISE TILING, WITH SWIRLING ARABIC CALLIGRAPHY PART OF THE DESIGN

tomb of Tamerlane, also known as Timor, in Samarkand; inside, the mausoleum is lavished in gold, cobalt blue and turquoise tiling, with swirling Arabic calligraphy part of the design. It's a jaw-dropping but fitting tribute to one of the most important, if notorious, men in Uzbekistan's history. Timor was known as a brutal and feared conqueror who ruled throughout the 14th century, merrily slashing his way through most of Asia, the Caucasus, and Southern Russia to rebuild the Mongol Empire - which had been founded a hundred years before by another notorious warrior, Ghengis Khan - until he finally became the most powerful ruler in the Muslim world. Think *What We Do In The Shadows'* Nandor the Relentless, in his pre-vampire days. Despite his bloody past, he is highly credited with defending Uzbekistan from other countries - China, Mongolia, Turkey - who envied its strategic spot at the centre of the Silk Road, and developing the nation, which is why most Uzbek cities have some kind of statue of him on display for all to see.

After Timor's death in 1405, the country was ruled by various factions until the 1920s, when it fell under the control of the Russian Empire, and in 1924 it became a republic of the Soviet Union. At this point, as you might imagine, life here became rather bleak - there was a push towards mass

industrialisation and away from its former agricultural economy, focusing largely on cotton production. However, Uzbekistan managed to declare independence in 1991, not long before the Soviet Union collapsed; today you can still see some remnants of that era, from Brutalist-style architecture to street sellers peddling former Red Army caps and medals, and, in one rather comical instance, an ice cream vendor selling 'CCCP' branded choc ices. And, perhaps unexpectedly, silk production is still a big part of the country's economy; today Uzbekistan is the third largest silk producer in the world, after China and India.

I observe fields and fields of mulberry trees on the drive between Khiva and Bukhara, and Marat explains there is a state monopoly on silk production. "There is no free market here. Farmers are given silkworm eggs by the government to produce the thread," he says, "and the industry falls under the remit of the Ministry of Agriculture." Swathes of fabric and exquisitely-made garments are still sold in stores and on stalls; one of the most popular designs is ikat print, a form of tie-dyeing, and one afternoon we visit a traditional weaver >

**SILK ROAD:** [left] The Poi Kalyan Square in Bukhara; [right] an Uzbek carpet weaver in Khiva



(left-to-right) Mienny/Stock; Davor Lovinici/Stock; Mienny/Stock

**KHIVA GREEN:** [right] Kaltaminor is one of the most celebrated minarets in the small city of Khiva

> in Bukhara who still uses a wooden, foot-powered loom to skilfully blend the dyed fibres. Craftspeople are visible everywhere, whether it's the man painstakingly using tiny horsehair brushes to paint highly-detailed miniatures near leafy Lyabi-Hauz square in Bukhara – notable for its small, serene lake – another carving elaborate designs into blocks of wood along an atmospheric, narrow alleyway in Khiva, or the young boy etching designs into copper plates in front of the three imposing madrasas in Samarkand's vast Registan square. It's decidedly lovely how much Uzbekistan has held on to, and celebrates, its more charming past.

But that's not to say that it hasn't evolved with the times; it is, increasingly, a 21st-century, Central Asian powerhouse, rich in minerals as well as oil and natural gas. Uzbekistan is the fifth biggest country in the world when it comes to gold mining, and it also has exportable reserves of silver, uranium, zinc, and copper – 'pretty much everything on the periodic table,' laughs Marat. While it's not as wealthy as its neighbour, Kazakhstan, its economy is rapidly developing and receives hefty investment from China. Tourism is growing here, too, with new hotels opening in major sites such as Khiva and Tashkent, and plans afoot to launch adventure travel – including parachuting and skydiving – and even geological, industrial and military tourism, as well as more sustainable travel. Throughout my journey, whether going by domestic flight on the national carrier, Uzbekistan Airways, via our private coach on well-maintained highways, or on the futuristic Bukhara to Tashkent high-speed (up to 160mph) train line, the country certainly appears to be thriving. Perhaps there's nowhere better



to observe how much than in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's economic centre. Following a [devastating earthquake in 1966](#), the city was re-planned and reconstructed with plenty of wide avenues, green spaces and fountains. It takes around 15 minutes to get downtown from the airport, and most of the buildings we pass en route are modernistic, steel-and-glass constructions. Some stand out, however, such as the fabulously Soviet-style Hotel Uzbekistan, which dates from the late 1960s, and is as kitschily elaborate inside as it is stark and geometric outside.

My visit takes in Independence Square, a huge space in the middle of the city peppered with monuments, statues and fountains, and ringed by administrative

government buildings. Nearby, in a smaller square, is the sombre but imposing Monument to Courage, a tribute to those who died in the earthquake – around 200 people – and a celebration of those who came from all over the world to help rebuild. And then, my first taste of those glorious, heavenly, cerulean, cobalt, indigo, sapphire

Despite a moderate magnitude that was measured between 5.4 and 5.6 on the Richter scale, the **earthquake** caused devastating damage with an estimated 200 fatalities

and ultramarine tiles which are such a symbol of Uzbekistan as a whole, at the impressive Hazrati Imam complex, a mix of mosques, madrasas and mausoleums named after Tashkent's first

imam. The buildings date from between the 16th and 20th centuries, and, of course, are almost gleamingly immaculate. It's a fitting metaphor for the country as a whole: old and new co-existing side by side, kept clean and pristine, and, lastly, showcasing more than fifty shades of blue... ♦

*A seven-night Highlights of Uzbekistan tour with Jules Verne costs from £2,045; [vjv.com](#).*

UZBEKISTAN IS INCREASINGLY A 21ST-CENTURY, CENTRAL ASIAN POWERHOUSE, RICH IN MINERALS AS WELL AS OIL, GAS, GOLD, URANIUM, ZINC, AND COPPER