

SAMARKAND

In my old age I have come to the conclusion that there is no point in taking a holiday to *get away from it all* because you take your worries with you and therefore you are stuck with all the problems that you are trying to escape from. Darwin found this out at the end of the *Beagle* voyage that changed the world for him and the rest of us. Near the end of the trip he wrote a letter to his sister in which he wrote: *I am convinced it is a most ridiculous thing to go around the world, when by staying quietly, the world will go around with you.*

However disappointing a book turns out to be, it is worth reading if you come across one single enlightening fact. Likewise with travel, if you see one special sight the journey will have been worthwhile. And so it happened because in Bukhara I saw the *Samanid*, the pearl of Islamic architecture.

ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS

Damon and Sam had been asked to join a week's tour of Uzbekistan by a friend who was representing an English tourist firm and kindly asked us if we would like to join them as their guests. Much reading had been done so everyone knew what we hoped to see, but the itinerary came with the added provisos of *if open, or if allowed*. It looked as though we would be afloat in the uncharted waters of Central Asia like a modern day Marco Polo!

The group met at a London airport and flew with Uzbekistan Airways to Tashkent. The Russian aeroplane definitely had a communist flavour to it, but it got us there in one piece. This was probably something of a miracle as we were forced to park miles from the terminal on account of the area surrounding it being blocked solid by numerous abandoned planes that were in various stages of being cannibalised. On disembarking we climbed into a bus that threaded its way between the carcasses, eventually arriving at the terminal.

A quick drive around Tashkent did nothing to lift the gloom, but once out on the road to Samarkand our spirits rose. On arrival at the hotel we were allotted rooms and Margie spotted that our number was 1001. What an omen!

The room was bare of gossamer pink curtains, oriental cushions, musicians or belly dancers, but the view from the window of the Monet-red sun sinking to the horizon was unbelievable. The golden light of Samarkand washed the blue from the sky while Uzbek music floated up from a hidden source in the trees beneath. It was hard to believe that we were in Alexander the Great's fabled city of Maracanda, at the start of the Silk Route to China.

This was the land where over 2,000 years ago the Macedonian king had become enraptured by Roxanne and had taken her for his wife. Maracanda became Samarkand, and 18 centuries later Tamerlane made it his capital. From here the Mogul Emperor planned and executed one of the greatest and possibly the bloodiest conquests of land and people in human history. By the time of his death in 1405, his empire spread from Damascus to Delhi, and in the process he covered the Fertile Crescent with blood. He was the cruellest conqueror who has ever lived and after one battle boasted that he had filled seven bags with the right ears of the male captives!

Tamerlane's cruel reign barely lasted 35 years, but in that time he turned Samarkand into one of the wonders of the world by building palaces, mausoleums, mosques and a type of Islamic boarding school called a Madrasah. One of the greatest of these schools was the Registan.



Silk Road Caravans set out for China

The design of all the Madrasah is basically the same. On three sides of the quadrangle are two storeys of students' cubicles with a balcony joining the top-floor rooms. On the fourth side is the massive entrance, the Islamic version of the west front of our European cathedrals.

On the first morning after our arrival Damon and I couldn't wait to see the Registan so took the short walk down to see it before breakfast. Along the way we had our first taste of the little hat worn by all Uzbek males, a black skullcap decorated with four white almond seeds. No one seemed to be able to tell us what was important about almond seeds until Margie pointed out that we put almonds on the Christmas cake as a *symbol of fertility!*

Damon and I had taken a quick walk the previous night in the dark after dinner to stretch our legs before turning in. We were horrified to see in the morning light that most of the manhole covers were missing. It would not have been a good start to the trip if one of us had broken a leg! Missing manhole covers followed us throughout the trip, holes appearing in the middle of roads, sidewalks and even parks. They became the symbol of Uzbekistan for me and I wondered where they had all gone, as they seem to be an unlikely thing to want to steal. Perhaps they had never been delivered in the first place?

On reaching the Registan we were thrown back into the past. The sky-blue domes, rising above the tiled walls of yellow, green and azure, flashed in the morning sunlight. The slim minarets thrust upwards on either side of the vast portals of the Madrasah. No wonder in 1404 the visiting ambassador from Spain was dumbfounded. It certainly is an incredible sight!

The day was full of wonders. The women and children's clothes were as bright as a field of flowering marigolds, shades of orange being highly favoured. We visited the crowded bazaars, which were as full of colour as they were of people all bursting with activity. Tamerlane's own mausoleum is rather rundown and not at all impressive. His bones lie beneath what was the largest slab of green jade in the world until someone tried to carry it off and broke it in the process! It is now stuck together in the middle with cement, which I thought served him right.



The Registan

Lunch was in an outside arcade restaurant at the foot of Ulugh Beg's observatory, a man to be praised. Ulugh was Tamerlane's grandson and a scholar of Isaac Newton's calibre. We climbed the hill to visit the remaining bottom third of the massive sextant he had built. Unfortunately the Islamic priests destroyed the observatory after Ulugh was murdered by his son. The boy obviously took after his great-grandfather!

Ulugh's amazing building was only excavated in 1908. Looking down into the pit at the remains of what is left of the massive sextant is an academic bombshell. The sextant was originally housed in a circular four-storey high building. An optical instrument reflected the light of the star being plotted onto a 90-degree sextant with a radius of some 120 foot.

This incredibly precise instrument enabled Ulugh to chart the night skies. The readings he and his colleagues made 600 years ago were so accurate that the star and planet tables he compiled were still being used centuries later in Europe. This man lived 100 years before Copernicus and 200 years before Galileo! The parallels between his life and that of Galileo are tragically similar, as both men were silenced by religion. Luckily some of Ulugh Beg's colleagues escaped to Europe with the star charts so they were saved.

At all the tourist sites there was the usual collection of souvenir stalls selling junk, however, there was one unique difference because there were no postcards. Instead there were young men selling their own tiny paintings and I started to make a collection of these as many of them showed remarkable talent and certainly caught the spirit of the places we visited.

To contrast the frenetic crowds in the bizarre, we visited the quiet of the Holy Shrine that houses the bones of Mohammed's cousin. This man was attacked by the mob, but survived by falling down a well that suddenly appeared and has since become a place of pilgrimage!



The tomb of the Prophet Mohammed's cousin

After a well-earned whisky and a Russian shower with a difference, we all returned to the Registan for an evening performance put on by a troop of itinerant gypsies. The show took place in one of the beautiful Madrasah courtyards that lie behind the massive portals. A stage had been set up on one side and opposite it was a line of large square divan beds that each held about six people. There was a square wooden dance floor in front of us that we had been told earlier covered a water cistern some 60-foot deep. Hopefully someone had checked its safety and we were not in for a dramatic curtain call!

We kicked off our shoes, climbed up onto the beds, drank Caspian champagne and ate the sweetmeats as we waited for the show to begin.

Suddenly high up on a floodlit balcony a Mullah dressed in white called us to attention. What a sound! He was answered from the opposite side by another neck-tingling voice and then with drums beating, rams' horns blaring, the actors burst upon us. What a spectacle! The rainbow had come to earth and colour was everywhere. The play was mimed and the story must have been told a million times in every country in the world by every people. The girl refuses to marry the rich ugly old man because she has fallen in love with a beautiful poor young boy. Well, of course it all ends happily as the boy turns out to be a Prince! Our cheering increased as the champagne flowed.

At dawn the following day we took off on a five-hour bus trip to Bukhara. The road rolled across a bare sun-baked earthen plain that receded to purple and mauve mountains, the last fingers of the Pamiras that run out into the Kara Kum Desert. Now and then we passed a shepherd caring for a flock of fat-tailed sheep. The distances between the villages grew greater and greater, until all sign of habitation disappeared altogether. Well off the road and well away from our roaring monster, we occasionally saw little groups of peasants trotting along on their donkeys.

The heat in the bus rose and muttering amongst the troops followed. Just before there was a rebellion, we pulled over to the side of the road by a genuine 14th century Caravanserai, or at least, the remains of one. By the road was a domed cistern that held the water for the camels. The water was brought from the river by a ten-mile long underground brick-lined tunnel! I could not touch the bottom of the cistern with a six-foot long reed. We looked, walked and stretched and then got back into the bus again.

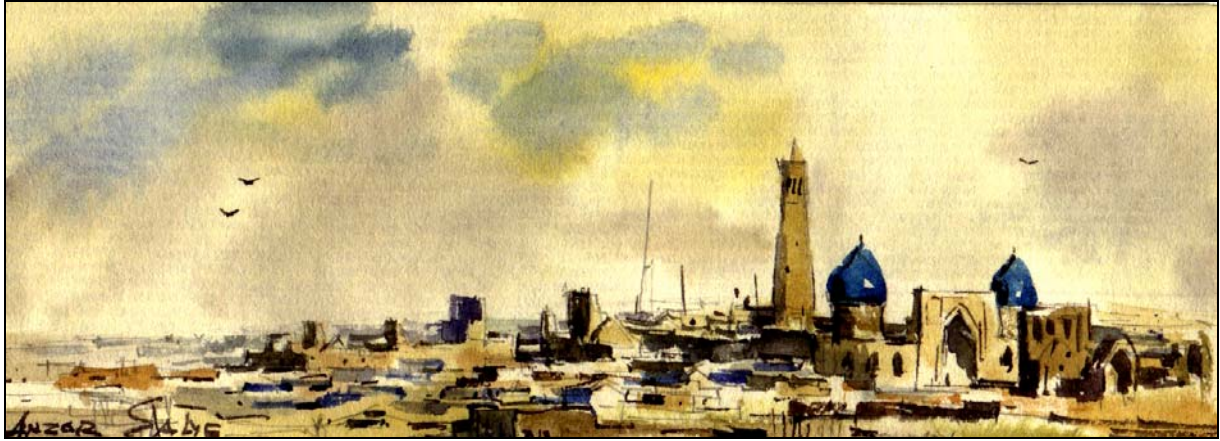
Soon after this we arrived in cotton-growing country and passed by miles of irrigated fields. The cotton was being handpicked by the peasants so we stopped and talked to some of the brightly-dressed girls. Although only earning a pittance they all seemed very cheerful.

We crossed the Zerafsham River so knew we were approaching Bukhara. According to the map the Zerafsham divides to form a large island on which the town sits. In reality there is no island, as before reaching Bukhara the river disappears beneath the sand. If it had managed to keep its head above ground for another 20 miles it would have reached Alexander's famous River Oxus, now called the Amu Darya. Because all the water is now stolen from the Oxus to irrigate the cotton fields, it fails to reach the Aral Sea. On our flight home we saw what was left of the Aral Sea, a puddle of brine surrounded by a desert of salt! It is one of the saddest sights you can imagine and a terrible indictment of communist Russia's agricultural policy.

At the height of its fame as a seat of learning it was said of Bukhara that *Elsewhere in the world the light comes down from Heaven, but in Bukhara it ascended*. The city is crowded with mosques, madrasahs, minarets and mausoleums. The feeling here is quite different to Samarkand and it seemed a much older place. We walked the mud-paved canyon streets of the old part of town that gave one the feeling that nothing had changed for centuries. The town smells of a generous mixture of animal dung, straw and mud, that is used to daub the brown walls.

Because of the frequent earthquakes the locals have invented a marvellous system of building their houses on a foundation bed of branches.

The walls are of vertical sticks and smeared with a half-inch thick skin of mud, front and back. This type of construction allows the building to shake a bit when a tremor happens and the only damage caused is that the house loses its skin of mud which is easily replaced as the dry daub can be watered down and then trowelled back onto the wall. You felt as though nothing had changed since Marco Polo had visited in 1260!



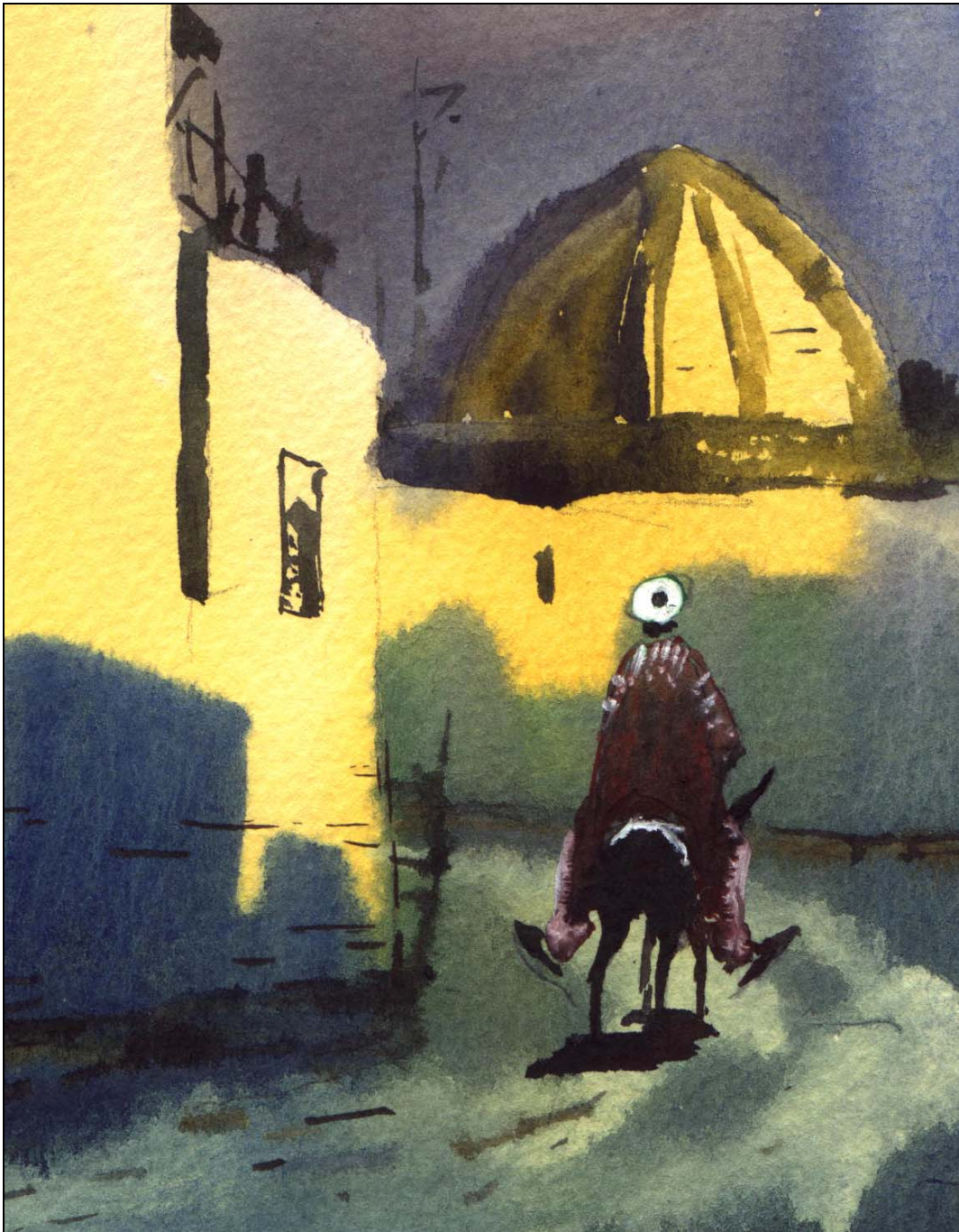
Bukhara



Bukhara Madrasah entrance and Tower of Death

About eight foot up on the outside wall, and stretching all along the side of every street, is a three-inch diameter pipe carrying the natural-gas supply. Little pipes welded on to the bigger one disappear through the walls into each house. One morning when Damon and I were out for our pre-breakfast walk, we saw a woman talking through a tiny window in a long blank wall, causing us

to investigate. It turned out to be a bakery shop and smiling faces and waving hands beckoned us inside where we saw a flame-thrower belching a great tongue of burning gas into a brick-lined oven. We were given a loaf of mouth-watering crispy brown bread with a glazed top. We had devoured half of the top as we walked down the street before meeting a small boy to whom we gave the rest. His grin reached from ear to ear until his older brother appeared and started pushing him along, no doubt ordering him not to talk to foreigners. We wondered what his story would be on arriving home with a half-eaten loaf!



Mud buildings, streets and Money Exchange

We came across another amazing building invention in Bukhara. The mud-brick Tower of Death was built around 1500 and is 164-foot high and we were told has a 30-foot deep foundation. The secret of how it has survived the earthquakes is that the brick foundations are laid on a thick bed of reeds.

We saw one of these reed beds exposed under the foundations of a mud-brick mausoleum we visited outside the town. The heavy building lay on top of the reeds that were the thickness of a pencil, all lying in one direction. The weight of the building had not squashed the reeds flat thus allowing the thick layer to absorb any seismic shock. I don't suppose anyone knows how thick the layer of reeds is under the Tower of Death. The reeds have certainly done the trick, as when we climbed the Tower we saw not a single crack.

There is a nice story about the architect of the Tower of Death. Apparently he didn't want the Emir to make him start building the Tower before the foundations had set properly so he disappeared for three years. Another story tells of how the bricks were made. To ensure the workmen puddled the sand and clay with their feet properly, the foreman would bury the coins they were paid with in the wet slug to make sure the mixture was thoroughly blended as they had to find them with their toes! After the bricks were baked they were laid out along the road and the foreman would gallop his horse over the top. If any of the bricks chipped he would reject them all. I have a feeling some of these stories are made up for the tourists' benefit!

The Tower of Death was so named because it was the Emir's way of dealing with anyone he didn't like. They were forced to climb to the top where they were tied in a sack and then thrown over the edge. More pleasantly the Tower was also used as a desert lighthouse as a fire was kept burning at the top to guide the Silk Road caravans across the desert at night, but carrying the wood up for the fire must have been a back-breaking job!

Our next visit was to the Ark, the Citadel of the Emirs of Bukhara. It is built on top of an ancient Tell that covers an area of some 25 acres. The whole thing is made of dried mud carted there by slaves. For centuries mud houses have been built on top of fallen ones that had collapsed during an earthquake so now the ground level is about 80 foot above the city. It is staggering to think of the amount of labour and time that has gone into this enormous mound of dried mud over the thousands of years of occupation.

An 8-mile long and 15-foot high wall surrounds Bukhara and right up till the 20th century the despotic Emirs ruled from this ancient citadel. In front of the main gate to the citadel is the Execution Square. In later years the outside of the main entrance was faced with cut rock covering the back walls of fired brick. We entered through the great portal and climbed up the 100-yard long paved tunnel that curved round past the dungeons and emerged into sunlight at the top of the tunnel beside the entrance to the Emir's mosque.

On the right we passed the Emir's mud palace, and then turning right we entered the Reception Courtyard, which was about 150 foot long by 100-foot wide and open to the sky. We were told that this whole area of paved stone had once been covered by carpets. On the left and right sides are covered raised spectator stands. At the far end stood the Emir's throne under a canopy supported by two carved stone pillars depicting lions.

Several rules applied in the citadel that was home to 2,000 people. No man could leave without the Emir's permission and no women could ever leave once they had been let in! When one entered the presence of the Emir you had to crawl on all fours, and when dismissed you had to crawl out

backwards! It was the last of these rules that Queen Victoria's emissary, Captain Stoddard, refused to obey which eventually led to his being beheaded in 1842 in the Execution Square in front of the main entrance, after being incarcerated for 18 months in the Bug Pit.

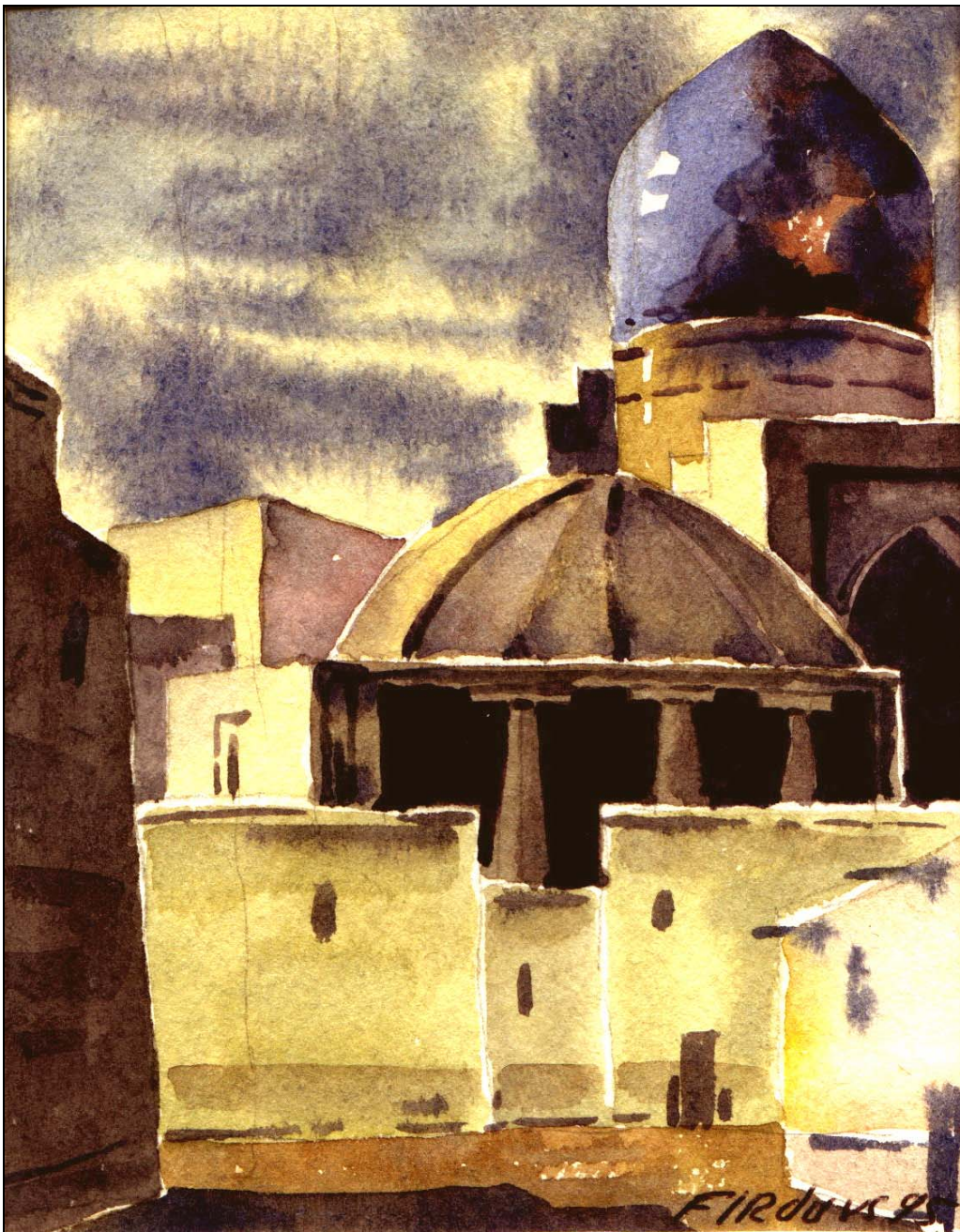
Having seen where Stoddard refused to crawl backwards we went to see the Bug Pit in which he spent so much time. It is in a separate fort within the Ark and is a very gruesome place indeed. Inside is a square room with a three-foot diameter hole in the middle of the floor below which is a 20-foot deep bottle-shaped pit. The only way out of this hellhole was to be pulled up by a rope. We were told that there were usually about ten prisoners being held at any one time and that most of them were pulled up only after they had died.



The mosque with four minarets

Our sadness continued when we visited a beautiful little mosque in the old part of town. From the painting I had bought it promised to be a gem as it was built like an upside-down table with four perfectly-proportioned minarets topped in turquoise blue. From the little painting we could see it was going to be a highlight of our visit.

We came out of a mud canyon into the little square in front of the mosque and to our surprise saw only three minarets. What had happened? We were told that three months before there had been four minarets but when they had started the restoration work on the foundations of one, something had gone wrong and one of them had collapsed, ruining what used to be the prettiest mosque in town. What earthquakes had failed to do for centuries had been achieved by modern technology in seconds!



'Jewish Islamic' mosque and 'Money Exchange', Bukhara

Another mosque we visited showed that in the past they had done something right. It had a twelve-sided dome rather than a conical one, proving it to be a very old building indeed and was close to where the Jewish moneychangers transacted their business for the Silk Route. This old mosque used to be shared by the Muslims and the Jews, Islamic during the day, Jews after sunset. Bukhara was also famous for its silk dyes, which were made by the Jews who were the descendants of the slaves carried away into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar!

The Russians bombed the Ark when they annexed the country in 1920, burning the carpets in the process. Bukhara used to be famous for its storks. Every dome used to have a nest on top of it but no bird has been seen in the city since 1974. Beside one of the pools, where the merchant's camels used to drink, are three 500-year-old mulberry trees and on one of these are the remains of an enormous stork's nest as a sad reminder of the glorious past of this once great, but incredible cruel city.

By the 20th century the Emir had decided to build a Summer Palace outside the city. Where to build was a problem but one thing was for certain, it had to be in the coolest place that could be found as summer temperatures in Uzbekistan reach 120 degrees in the shade. The problem was solved in what must be the most bizarre fashion that anyone could imagine. Several fat-tailed sheep were killed and then one was hung up at every site under consideration in the surrounding countryside. The site chosen was where the meat stayed edible the longest, as this meant that it must have been cooler! Thank goodness someone invented the refrigerator and we don't have to do that nowadays!

We went to have a look at the result. This mishmash of buildings has to be seen to be believed. The entrance is a massive portal that leads into a Persian-style courtyard, turn right, and wham, you're in front of a Russian palace. The courtyard is vast with buildings on three sides. In front of you is a two-storey high white wedding cake façade. The top windows are arched, the bottom windows are French doors, but in between are heart-shaped windows! To the right is a spectator stand like the one in the Ark's reception courtyard. To the left is something that defies description but is in fact the entrance to an onion-domed conservatory. Luckily the fourth side offers some relief to the eye, as it is an apricot orchard. We were told that apricots originally came from the Pamir Mountains.

Inside this amazing conservatory is a ghastly collection of painted plaster flower bowls full of painted plaster flowers, and so it goes on through the whole palace, one room of awful taste dutifully followed by another equally as bad. How did any of the visiting dignitaries keep a straight face? The Emir who built the palace has left us a full-length photograph of himself dressed in a Russian general's uniform. You would certainly not want to meet him on a dark night in a rough part of town! Looking through the binoculars at his little piggy eyes in a round fat face was one of the most unpleasant encounters I have ever had. To prove that I am not getting carried away we were told that the Emir was so pleased with the work done by the master-plasterer that when the work was completed, he had the man's hands mutilated so that he would not be able to work again and repeat the success for anyone else!

Out in the garden was a guest house built specially for the hoped for visit by the Tsar's daughter but, surprise surprise, someone must have told her about the host and the accommodation, so she cancelled the trip!

A little further on we came to the Harem. This is a simple building that was designed for its purpose and is full of colourful Uzbek tapestries and embroidery that had been done by the ladies in their spare time. Outside the Harem was a grand swimming lake, twice the size of a modern Olympic pool. Beside this was a covered pavilion raised about ten foot off the ground where the Emir could overlook the scene and throw an apple to the girls when they were bathing. The lucky one who caught the apple was invited to dinner!

Putting all this horror behind us, we travelled back to town to see the *Samanid*, the *Pearl of Central Asia*. It well deserves its name, as it really is a gem. Robin Magowan, in his book *Fabled Cities of Central Asia*, wrote: *Cultural historians are wont to talk as if there is such a thing as progression in art. I am struck, on the contrary, by how often the work that announces a new direction is never surpassed. The Samanid dances, reverberates out at you from all sides, in every timbre of voice, and the more you walk around it the more aware you become of the rhythmic clapping, the shouting out of joy, of a whole singularly patterned world.* The building really is architecturally perfect and deserves to be recognised for what it is.

It is not only one of the first baked-brick buildings erected in Central Asia; it is also one of the most beautiful ever built. It is very small when compared to the monsters erected by Tamerlane, being a mere 31 foot square and 40 foot high, not far from the Golden Rule. The *Samanid* was built by Sultan Ismail before AD 907, so Marco Polo must have seen it!



Sultan Ishmael's Samanid Mausoleum

Different clays have been used for the bricks making up the varied designs, thus causing the building to change colour as the hours pass. Apparently at night in the light of the full moon it is quite vibrant. I should have liked to have seen that, but it was impossible. My consolation is that one should always leave something for the imagination.



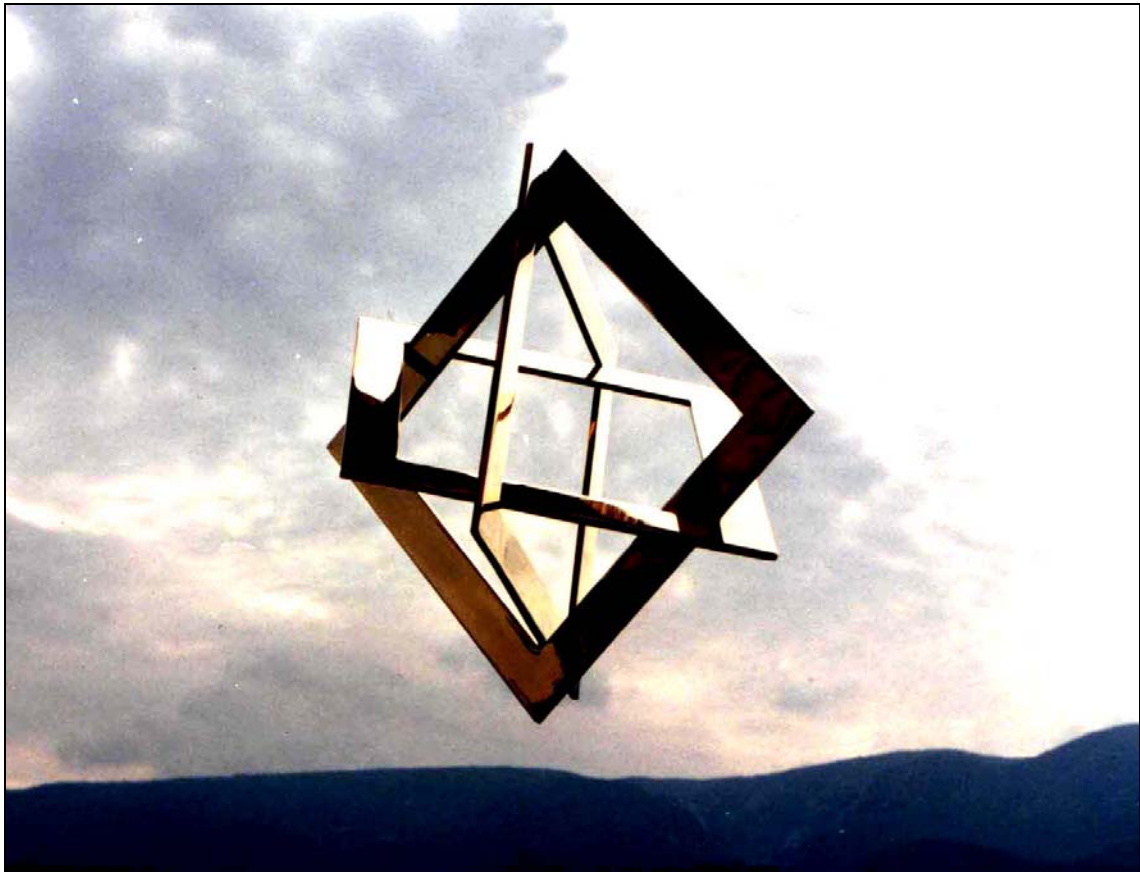
A Zoroastrian temple

I was lucky enough to find the Mausoleum completely empty when I arrived, having chosen to go on ahead of the group rather than visit the bazaar. A bribe to the guard enabled me to climb a ladder up onto the roof. Walking

around the outer edge was like being in another world. Another bribe got Damon up the ladder, as I just had to have a photograph of him on the top.

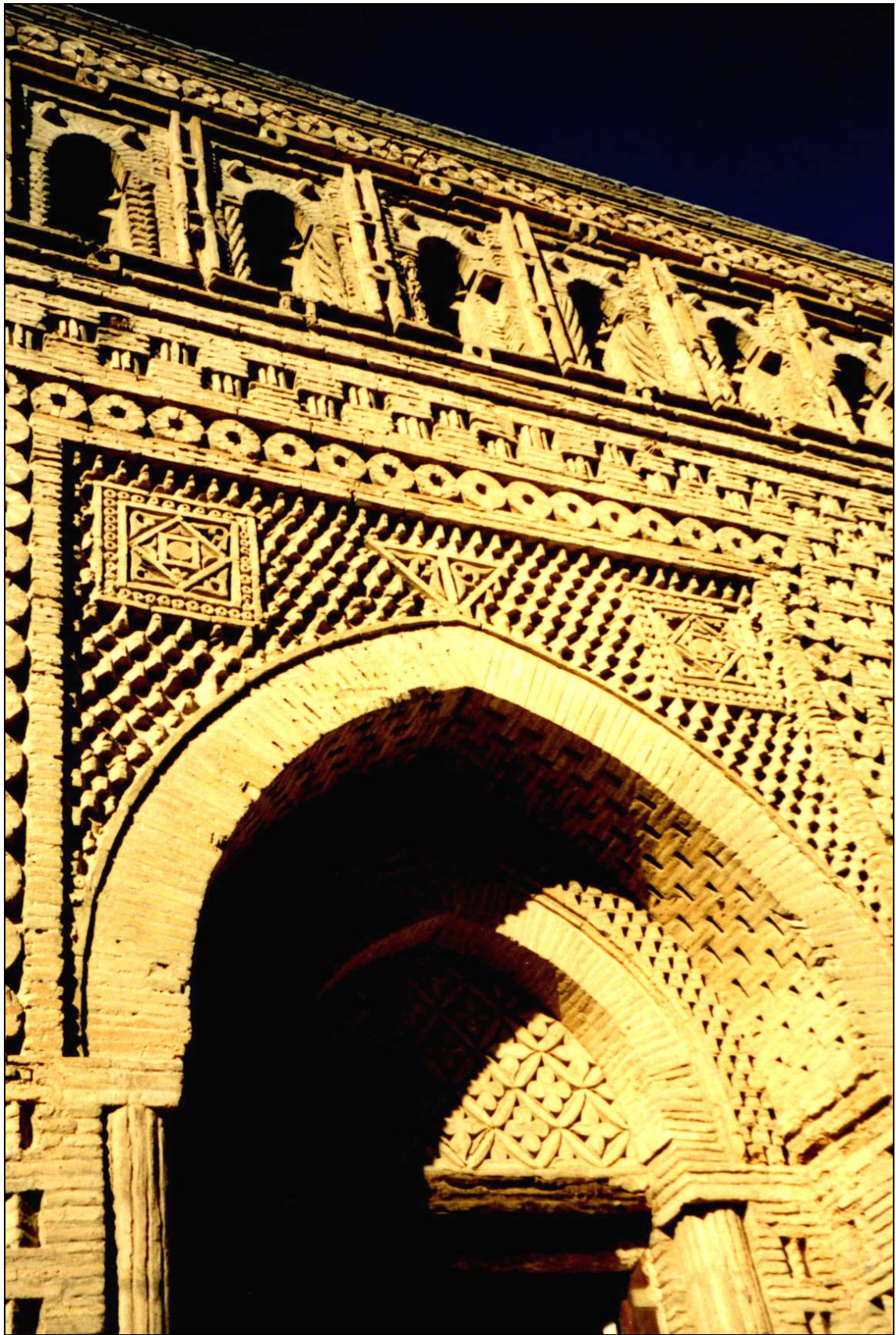
The history of the Samanid is as beautifully romantic to the mind as the building is to the eye. Deep feelings of veneration must have inspired the people who worshipped here in the days preceding the Mongol invasion because they buried the temple rather than see it razed to the ground. It remained buried for 700 years until 1924 when it was rediscovered by a Bolshevik soldier who happened upon the roof while looking for graves to plunder for jewellery. What a jewel he found! The Samanid rose from its deep sleep looking very youthful and mysterious, like Venus from the sea spray, a picture of perfection, unblemished from top to bottom.

One of the symbols that adorn its façade is the *Square within the Square*, which is the Zoroastrian symbol of Creation. I was amazed by the discovery of the Zoroastrian symbol for Creation as recently I had made my own *Creation* sculpture using squares. I had formed my sculpture around the mathematical concept of the Borromean Rings where, the structure is greater than the sum of the parts.



Creation

The Circle is their symbol of Fire, while the Square on its own is the symbol of the Earth representing the Four Winds. The Wheel is for the turning Heavens and Life, and the Diamond the universal symbol of Fertility. The walls imitate a woven basket and depict the marsh houses of the Fertile Crescent with their rounded reed columns supporting the four corners.



Square within the Square within the Square

On the journey back to Tashkent we stopped for a lunch of delicious bread, beer and grilled lamb on a skewer at a restaurant by the Zerafsham River. Green willows hung over the gently flowing water that made the silky riverweed undulate like a Danaid's hair. Gazing at this beauty I thought about all that we had seen: the poor but happy smiling people, dressed in their intensely colourful clothes and the beautiful children with their lovely faces. The pretty young mothers all had gold teeth that flashed in the sunshine when they smiled. The glowing browns of the old towns, plains, mountains, and of course, the Samanid. The miracle of blues that ranged from deep, almost black ultramarine, to the azure blue of the tiles on the domes of the Bukhara mosques and madrasahs, a kaleidoscope of symmetrical patterns.

Suddenly a flash of turquoise blue shot past me down the river, the blue beyond all blues, the Madonna blue of the kingfisher, which must have been the inspiration for the Uzbek artisans. Seeing the bird filled my cup to the brim. I shall never be able to thank Damon enough for giving us all such a never-to-be-forgotten magic-carpet ride to the Silk Road.

We arrived back in Tashkent and were immediately awoken from our dream of merchants haggling beneath 500-year-old mulberry trees as we had to spend a night in the city's grand hotel to share a meal with the British Consul. The hotel was a Soviet monstrosity of some ten storeys and unbelievably ugly. We were allotted rooms on the top floor and piled into a dodgy-looking lift to make the journey. Our rooms were indescribably awful and smelt of drains. As they were reserved for VIPs, God only knows what the lower floors were like!

When we had changed we met at the lifts for the journey back down to the lobby where we were to meet before going into dinner. The lift stopped at the fifth floor and the doors opened to reveal a huge Madam sitting at a desk with some very pretty girls standing around her. We stood transfixed as she glowered at us. Fortunately the doors closed automatically and we continued on our way down. Obviously there was another sort of business being run by the hotel on the fifth floor!

We were early and had to wait in the lobby so Damon decided that he just had to return to his room to fetch something and would I please come with him! On the way back down again we shared the lift with two very beautiful girls who pushed the fifth floor button. Lots of smiles and some inviting monosyllabic Russian words followed by lots of giggles and, "No, no, thank you," from us both. When the lift stopped the concentration-camp guard Madam was standing right there, glaring at us!

The dinner food was incredibly awful, made worse by a loud dance band and their dreadful female vocal support. Why does every trip have to start and finish in a hellhole of an airport? I would not have missed seeing the *Samanid* for anything, but I am glad I have now reached the age when I can, as Darwin wished and wrote, '*stay quietly at home and let the world go around with me*'.