

THE JOURNEY

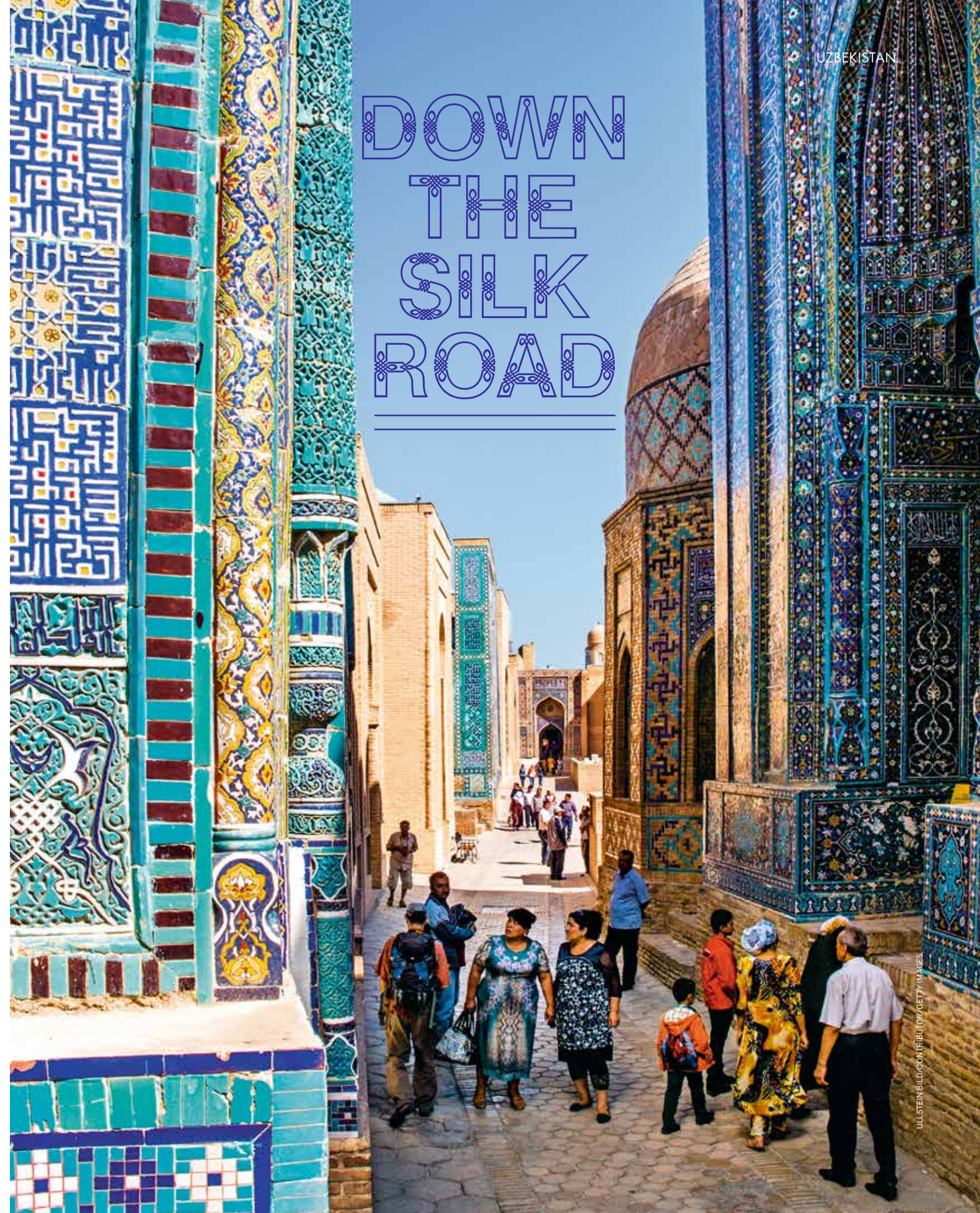
Uzbekistan is a land of stunning monuments and people brimming with warmth. While Tashkent is more westernised, women outside the capital often dress up in traditional attire. Facing Page: Shah-i-Zinda Necropolis in Samarkand is a sprawling complex of tombs and mausoleums ranging from the ninth to the 15th centuries. Many of Timur's relatives, including his sister and niece, were laid to rest here.



FRIEDRICH SCHMIDT/PHOTOGRAPHER'S CHOICE/GETTY IMAGES

UZBEKISTAN

DOWN THE SILK ROAD



ULLSTEIN/ELD/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES

A CROSS-COUNTRY TRIP IN UZBEKISTAN REVEALS LAYERS OF HISTORY, CENTURIES-OLD ARCHITECTURE, AND A BOLLYWOOD-LOVING PEOPLE

By Prachi Joshi



Uzbeks have a special place in their hearts for India and Bollywood, and it isn't uncommon to hear them reel off names of actors and movies, or sing Hindi songs to a tourist.

“Hindustan? Shah Rukh Khan! Photo?” It's a rapid-fire round, interspersed with a smiling “Namaste!” I'm in Samarkand, mid-way through my 10-day journey across the Republic of Uzbekistan, and I know the drill by now. Everyone, from schoolchildren and teenagers to middle-aged men and women, has accosted me for group photographs. Now, as I sit on the steps of Sher-Dor Madrasa to take in the sheer grandeur of the surrounding Registan complex, two teenagers magically materialise on either side,

while a third takes our picture. I thought this only happened to white women. The Uzbeks seem to love India and Indians, and Bollywood is obviously a big part of the attraction. I have had a waiter in a Russian restaurant in Tashkent sing, “Main Shayar toh nahin,” from *Bobby*, while a cabbie in Samarkand reeled off names of the Kapoor *khandaan*, from Raj to Kareena. I bet they are ecstatic that the latter has named her son Taimur; to the Uzbeks he is, after all, the Great Emir Timur.

PHILIPPE MICHEL/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (PAINTINGS), SARAH LOIS/SHUTTERSTOCK (BORDER)

TASHKENT CAPITAL IDEA

I begin my trip in the capital city of Tashkent, enshrined in our history books as the place where a peace agreement was signed to end the Indo-Pak war of 1965. My guide Khurshid Turgunov takes me to the spot where the agreement was signed by the then Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. While the building has been replaced by a newer government office, the surrounding **Independence Square** remains one of Tashkent's major attractions. It comprises a sprawling park with administrative buildings, a recreation area with landscaped gardens and fountains, and a monumental archway adorned with sculptures of storks. I'm impressed

domed **Chorsu Bazaar** in the old city. A market has existed here for hundreds of years, likely going back to the ninth century. I wander past rows upon rows of fresh fruits and vegetables, heaped sacks of spices, and shelves groaning under the weight of dry fruits. Heavenly aromas of baking waft from the separate bread section; a central hall is lined with meat cuts ranging from lamb to horse, the latter a much-loved delicacy in Uzbekistan. The market spills over into the surrounding narrow alleys, chock-a-block with stalls selling clothes, household wares, and kitchen knick-knacks; there's even a fellow selling live turtles (presumably as pets),



by the city's wide, tree-lined roads, but much less so by its Communist-style building blocks. However, the **Hazrat Imam Complex**, a five-minute drive northeast of the square, is a must-see thanks to its collection of blue-domed mosques and madrasas built between the 15th and 21st centuries. A 20-minute drive away lies the striking, pale-blue-and-white, 19th-century **Russian Orthodox Cathedral** with golden onion domes.

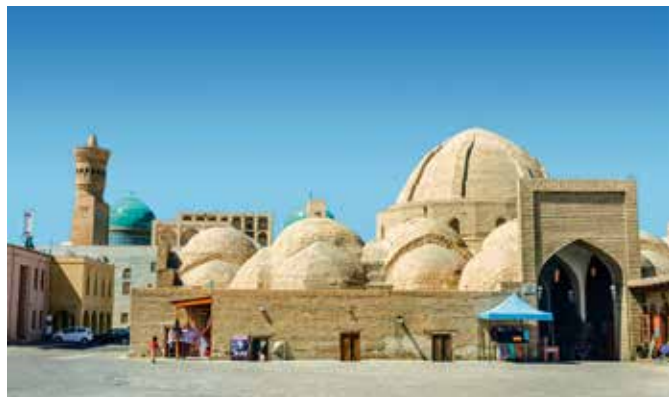
My favourite Tashkent spot is the massive aquamarine-

Chorsu Bazaar is at the heart of public life in Tashkent. Locals shop here for fresh produce, meat, poultry, and above all, their daily bread, *non*.

and more bread vendors hawking freshly made *non* (tandoor-baked flatbread, a denser version of naan) of assorted shapes and sizes. I meet brother-sister duo Tulkun and Dildora, who enthusiastically offer me a taste of their non: warm bread, golden and crusty on the outside with a chewy crumb within.

BUKHARA

STANDING TALL



The heavily fortified Ark of Bukhara (left) houses a palace and archaeological museum; Clay figurines (top right) of traditionally dressed Bukharans are great souvenirs; The Kalyan Minaret (bottom right) is surrounded by covered medieval-era bazaars that are now shopping areas.

fly over snow-clad mountains and azure lakes to arrive in Bukhara, a city that is said to be over 2,700 years old, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Along with Samarkand, it was one of the great cities of the Silk Road. Intricate Suzani embroidery, gold weaving, wood carving and ceramic making still thrive here. The town of **Gijduvan**, 50 kilometres northeast of Bukhara, is especially known for its unique style of hand-painted green-and-brown pottery. Here, at the workshop of Alisher Narzullaev, a sixth-generation ceramicist, I get a demonstration: Every piece is hand-painted with bird, flower, and leaf motifs; and covered with glaze that is mixed in a massive grinding stone turned by donkeys—a process unchanged since six generations. The pieces are fired upside down, which causes the paint to run down and dry into teardrop patterns, a distinctive mark of Gijduvan pottery.

Back in Bukhara, the most iconic monument is the **Kalyan Minaret**, a 12th-century, 150-foot tower built of sandstone-coloured bricks, topped with an arched rotunda. Back in the day, muezzins would summon the people to prayer from here. “A hundred years later, Genghis Khan sacked the city but spared the tower; he threw dissenters off it,” says Turgunov. This practice continued well into the 20th century, when criminals were executed from here. The **Po-i-Kalyan Mosque**

(“mosque at the foot of Kalyan”) dates to the 16th century, and has an inner courtyard surrounded by arched galleries.

The next morning, I head to see the **Ark of Bukhara**, an imposing mud-and-brick fortress built on an artificial hill in the city centre. Parts of the fortress date to the fifth century with elements added over time, including a fortified outer wall, soaring towers, latticed balconies, and a throne room. Later, I visit **Samani Park**, a five-minute drive from the Ark, to see the oldest still-preserved monument in Bukhara—the ninth-century **Ismail Samani Mausoleum**, the only surviving monument from the Samanid dynasty (the last Persian dynasty to rule Central Asia, between the eighth and ninth centuries). The shrine is a curious combination of Zoroastrian and Islamic styles with an intricately carved facade. Nearby stands the 13th-century **Chashma Ayub**, also known as Job’s Well, a brick structure topped with a conical dome, which contains a mausoleum and a holy spring. “When the people of Bukhara were suffering for lack of water, Prophet Job (Ayub) struck the ground here and a well was formed,” explains Turgunov. Water problems were frequent in Bukhara and the city built several ponds. **Lyab-i-Hauz**, a five-minute drive away, is one of the few that remains—a 17th-century pond surrounded by three stunning madrasas, as well as several cafés and restaurants.

ONEWORLD.PICTURE/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES (ARK), ALEXANDER RYUMIN/TASS/GETTY IMAGES (FIGURINES), DINOZZAVER/SHUTTERSTOCK (DONES)

SAMARKAND

SIX FEET UNDER

My next destination is Samarkand, a name that has always evoked the romance of the Silk Road in my mind. And I’m off to a great start on the so-called **King’s Road**, an arterial part of the route in the 11th century, now the M37 Highway connecting Bukhara and Samarkand. I stop at **Rabat-i-Malik** where a *sardoba* or water reservoir dating to the 14th century stands a couple of feet below the road level. The structure resembles an igloo made with bricks and it stands over a water body, which was used for drinking and washing. Across the busy road are the ruins of an 11th-century **caravanserai**. Unfortunately, the 1968 earthquake that shook Uzbekistan levelled off most of the remains. Yet, my guide paints me a vivid picture of the carved arched portal bearing Arabic inscriptions, foundations of individual rooms where the merchants must have retired for the day, the sunken bath houses, the dance podium surrounded by remnants of columns. I can almost imagine the bustle and revelry at this centuries-old motel (of sorts).

Samarkand’s history stretches beyond the Silk Road; it was founded as Afrasiab in the seventh century B.C. “You’re standing over 27 levels of Samarkand’s life,” says Turgunov as I contemplate a hilly grass mound, which is an archaeological site and all that remains of Afrasiab before it was completely destroyed by a marauding Genghis Khan in 1220. The adjoining **Afrasiab Museum** has an excellent collection of

excavated artefacts, as well as colourful seventh-century frescoes depicting festivals and processions from China, Iran, and India. Nearby is the **Shah-i-Zinda** necropolis complex that sprung up around the (purported) grave of Kusam ibn Abbas, Prophet Muhammad’s cousin. The necropolis houses ritual buildings from the ninth to the 15th centuries in a glorious mish-mash of architectural styles ranging from the simple tombs to elaborate, palatial mausoleums.

Timur was born in a town near Samarkand and he made the city his capital in 1370, constantly building and beautifying it, giving rise to the Timurid style of architecture—spectacular domed buildings whose facades were decorated with turquoise and blue tiles sporting geometric and floral patterns. While the **Bibi Khanym Mosque** near Siyab Bazaar in Samarkand built with the spoils of his India conquest, is mostly in ruins, the **Registan Complex**, a short drive away, with its lavish mosques and madrasas is quite the centrepiece of Samarkand.

Don’t miss a visit to the bustling **Siyab Bazaar**, the largest market in the city and one that dates from the times of the Silk Road; the highlight is the bread bazaar where dozens of women sell the famed Samarkand bread, a flat, round bread with a shiny, glazed top that is said to be edible for three years. “Just sprinkle some water and warm it in the *tandir* (tandoor). Even Babur craved for this bread when he went to India,” Turgunov declares proudly.



The 17th-century Sher-Dor Madrasa is part of the Registan Complex in Samarkand. The tiger mosaics and sun-face depicted on the arch are at variance with traditional Islamic-style architecture that forbids images of living beings in places of worship.

HERMES IMAGES/AGF RM/GETTY IMAGES

FERGANA

GREEN VALLEY



Rishtan pottery (left) is known for its intricate geometric and nature-inspired patterns, and vivid blue and white colours; At the Yodgorlik Silk Factory in Margilan (right) everything is still done by hand, from silk spinning and dyeing to ikat weaving.

Uzbekistan's connection with India goes beyond Timur's infamous sack of Delhi. His great-great-great-grandson, Babur, was born in Andijan in the fertile **Fergana Valley** in eastern Uzbekistan. Today, this dusty, industrial city holds little more than memories of the first Mughal. The **Babur Memorial Park** in the heart of city is a welcome respite from the summer sun as is the little house-museum in it, that showcases Babur's life and artefacts. His pensive statue sits in the middle of the garden while his symbolic grave stands behind the museum (he was buried in Kabul). The only surviving structure from his time is the madrasa that he studied at. It's in a woeful state, much to my surprise and disappointment, and contains a forgettable museum.

But Fergana is more than just about Babur. I travel 75 kilometres west to **Margilan**, a town supposedly founded by Alexander the Great. This was an important stop on the Silk Road and its high-quality silk was in much demand then.



At the **Yodgorlik Silk Factory**, I get a peek at the traditional method of silk-weaving and ikat work where everything is still done by hand. Further west, in the town of **Rishtan**, I visit the workshop of Rustam Usmanov who makes the famed blue-and-white ceramics, another handicraft that's a legacy of the Silk Road.

I return to Tashkent by train, the route cutting through the **Kuramin Mountains** (Chatkal Range, part of the Western Tian Shan). The stark mountainous landscape gives way to small settlements, rolling fields with horses languidly grazing away, bountiful fruit orchards, and mulberry-lined streets. It's not difficult to see why Babur waxed eloquent about this land in the *Baburnama* and why everyone from Alexander the Great to Genghis Khan set out to conquer it. For me, however, the abiding image of Uzbekistan will remain of its ever-smiling, gregarious people clamouring for a photo with me, a stranger from a foreign land connected to them by years of history. And Bollywood. ●

PRACHI JOSHI (POTTERY), MEHMETO/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (WEAVING)

ON THE PLATTER

A SMORGASBORD OF UZBEK SPECIALITIES WORTH TRYING

- Assorted *non*—it's worth sampling this flatbread hot off the tandoor. Each city and town has its own style.
- *Samsa*, a cousin of our samosa—buttery, flaky pastry filled with spiced (usually) lamb meat baked to golden brown perfection.
- *Shashlyk* or *kabob*—succulent meat kebabs.
- *Manti*—meat- or vegetable-filled dumplings.
- *Shurpa*—meat and vegetable soup, sometimes served in a bowl of hollowed out bread.
- *Dimlama*—a hearty meat and vegetable stew.
- *Plov*—a lamb and rice dish similar to our biryani.
- Uzbek cuisine is traditionally meat-heavy and vegetarians may have to make do with breads, soup, salads, and pasta.



Plov is a popular Uzbek dish made by simmering rice in a broth of meat and vegetables. It's available at most restaurants and roadside eateries.

ESSENTIALS



Uzbeks love donning ikat, either in fine, 100 per cent silk known as *khan atlas* (king's silk) or in a mix of silk and cotton known as *adras*.

Uzbekistan Airways has direct flights from Delhi to Tashkent thrice a week. The major cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Fergana are well connected by air, rail, and road. Asia Hotels is a mid-range chain of hotels with presence in all four cities (*asiahotels.uz*; doubles from \$85/₹5,800). In Tashkent, City Palace Hotel is a centrally located 4-star hotel (*citypalace.uz*; doubles from \$135/₹9,300), while the cosy, boutique Hotel Platan (*hotel-platan.com*; doubles from \$105/₹7,300) is a good choice in Samarkand.

GRANT ROONEY/AGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA PHOTO LIBRARY (FOOD), XDINOZZAVER/SHUTTERSTOCK (STREET)