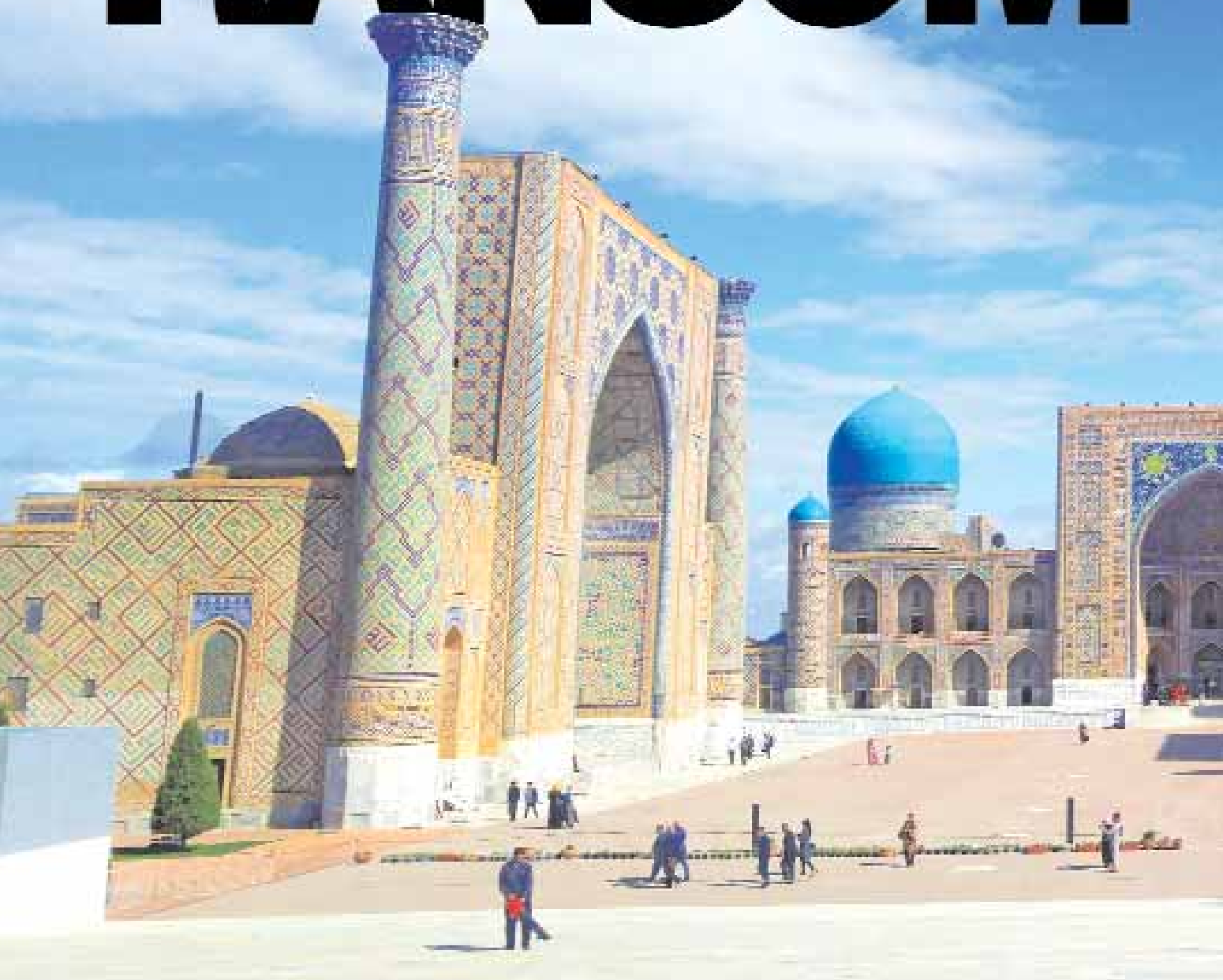


# KING'S RANSOM



MAJESTIC AND BEAUTIFUL, SAMARKAND IS ONE OF THE OLDEST CONTINUOUSLY INHABITED CITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA WITH A HISTORY AS OLD AS ROME'S WHICH HAS SEEN RULERS FROM CYRUS TO ALEXANDER, GENGHIS KHAN AND TIMUR, SAYS PRACHI JOSHI

From Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, to Alexander the Great and from Genghis Khan to Timur, Samarkand captured the imagination of every conqueror. Its position in the Zarafshan Valley put it right at the centre of the Silk Road, with trade routes from China, India and Europe intersecting here. Both the thriving trade and the various invasions shaped the city's culture into an eclectic potpourri of Persian, Indian, Mongolian and Western influences. From Alexander's Marakand to present-day Samarkand, the city's history is a fascinating deep dive into the forces that shaped the region (and the world order).





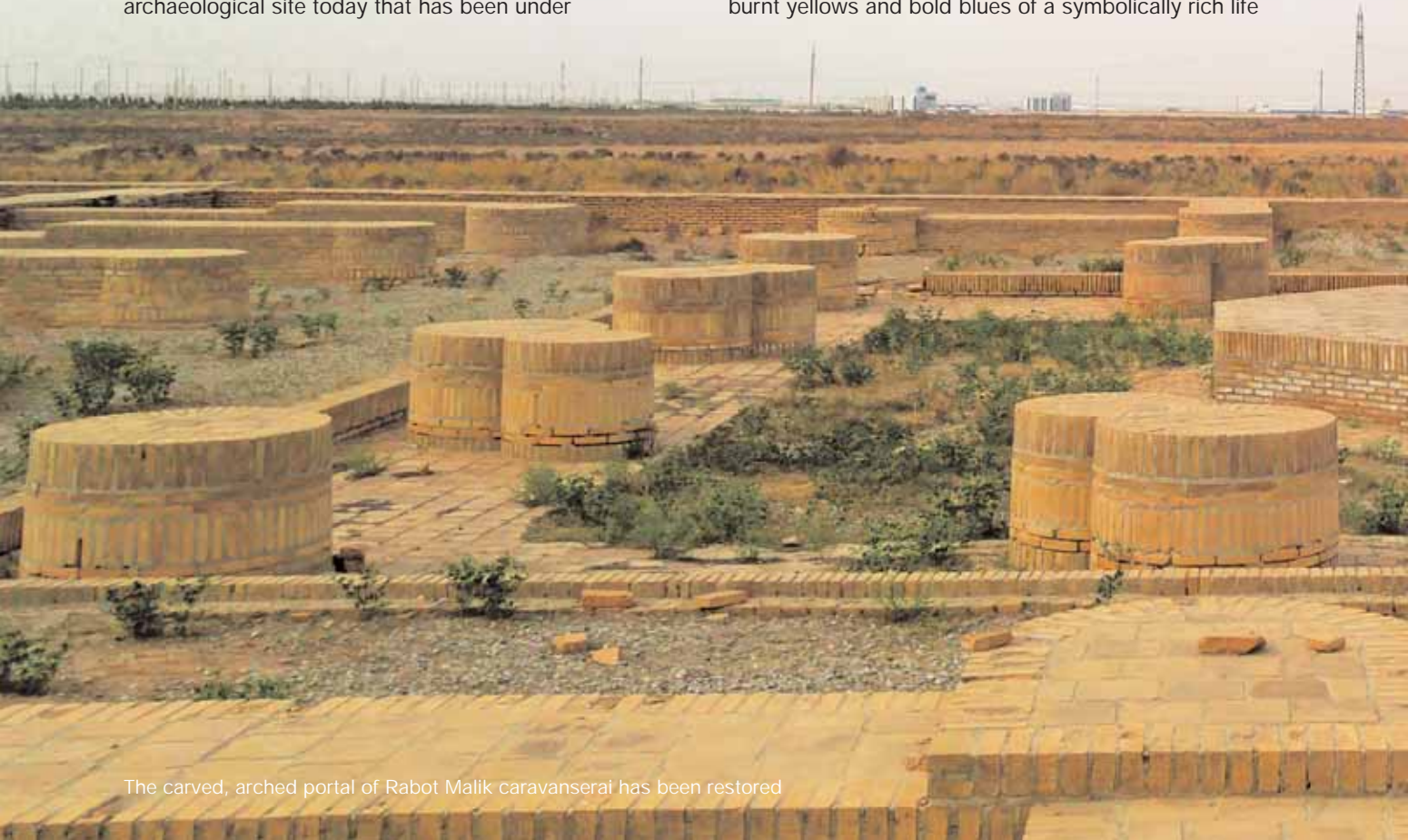
Mural inside Afrasiab Museum Samarkand that once adorned the reception hall of a palace.

## SIX FEET UNDER

Even before Alexander conquered it in 329 BC, Marakand (as Samarkand was known then) was a formidable city with a citadel and fortifications, a network of roads and a flourishing crafts centre. It was the capital of the Sogdia (or Sogdiana) province of the Achaemenid Empire, the first Persian Empire that reigned in the region from 550-330 BC. While not much remains above ground from this period, archaeological excavations reveal an interesting story. I begin my exploration of Samarkand in Afrasiab (variously Afrasiyab and Afrosiyob), a grassy hillock in the northern part of the modern city. The ancient settlement was built on higher ground for effective defence and its location between the Zarafshan River and a large fertile plain made it a prosperous city. Spread over 220 hectares, Afrasiab is largely an archaeological site today that has been under

excavation since the late 19th century. Many of the artefacts discovered here are on display at the Afrasiab Museum adjacent to the site. I wander its halls, admiring the collection of ossuaries, fragments of ancient swords, knives and arrows, coins, painted ceramics, terracotta figurines, and jewellery. There's even the remnant of a sewer system on display, all in all some 22,000 artefacts that tell the story of Afrasiab.

But the centrepiece of the museum is the Afrasiab Painting or the Ambassador's Painting, an elaborate, large scale 7th century wall mural that once adorned the reception hall of a palace. The mural was accidentally discovered when the local authorities started digging a road in the vicinity of Afrasiab in 1965. It occupies the walls of one of the exhibition rooms in the museum, much like it would have adorned the palace hall. Strategically placed lighting highlights the rust browns, burnt yellows and bold blues of a symbolically rich life



The carved, arched portal of Rabot Malik caravanserai has been restored

sealed in the frame. Parts of it have been damaged but a massive three-year restoration was completed in 2017 with the assistance of UNESCO and French specialists. The mural presents a vivid picture of a ceremonial procession with envoys bearing gifts and paying their respects to the then King of Samarkand, Varkhuman.

On the northern wall, China is represented by a festival of dragon boats with the empress in a flotilla surrounded by musicians while the emperor (apparently of the Tang dynasty) is shown to be hunting. On the southern wall, there's a funerary procession representing Persia/Iran and on the eastern wall is presumably India depicted as a land of pygmies and astrologers (stereotypes seem to have been around even in the 7th century). On the main wall, Chinese envoys in exquisite silks and Korean ones with feathered headgear mill about and in the centre, astride a horse is King Varkhuman himself (though only a fragment of this portion remains). He is followed by equestrian troops while a decorated elephant leads his parade. The mural is a rare example of Sogdian art and underlines the importance of Samarkand on the world stage.

### MERCHANT TRAIL

The mere mention of Samarkand evokes the legends of the Silk Road, of caravans bearing silks, spices and porcelain passing through on their way from China or India to Europe, of bustling marketplaces and of merchants making merry in caravan *serais* that dotted the route. There are



Women selling Samarkand bread which is crispy on the outside and chewy on the inside

very few remains from that time but the busy Siyab (Siyob) Bazaar gives you a taste of the past. A market has existed at this spot since the times of the Silk Road, and even today locals throng here to buy their daily necessities, from fruits and vegetables to meat and poultry, and of course, the famed Samarkand bread. This flat, round bread with a shiny glazed top is crispy





(Clockwise) Rabot Malik Sardoba looks like a brick igloo with steps leading into the ground where there's a small pool of water; Shah-i-Zinda Necropolis has tombs ranging between 9th and 15th centuries and Sher-Dor Madrasah at Registan has the tiger mosaics depicted on the arched gateway, a decidedly un-Islamic motif

on the outside and chewy on the inside, and is said to last for several months if stored properly. I walk through the bread section, which is filled with the most heavenly aroma and the heat of several tandoors or clay ovens, where bakers are in a flurry to meet daily demands with assembly line perfection.

I head outside Samarkand on the M37 Highway that connects it to Bukhara. This was a major arterial route during the Silk Road era and was called the King's Road. At Rabot Malik, a small town on the way, I stop to see a 14th century *sardoba* or water reservoir. The Silk Road was interspersed with such reservoirs at regular intervals where the merchant caravans could stop for drinking water and washing up. The *sardoba* looks like a brick igloo with steps leading into the ground where there's a small pool of water. Across the highway stand the ruins of an 11th century caravanserai. The carved, arched portal has been restored but beyond it lies an expanse of the ruins where once sleeping rooms, bathhouses and dance podiums might have stood. A goat herd nonchalantly drives his flock amid the foundations while I think about Marco Polo who purportedly stopped here on his travels.

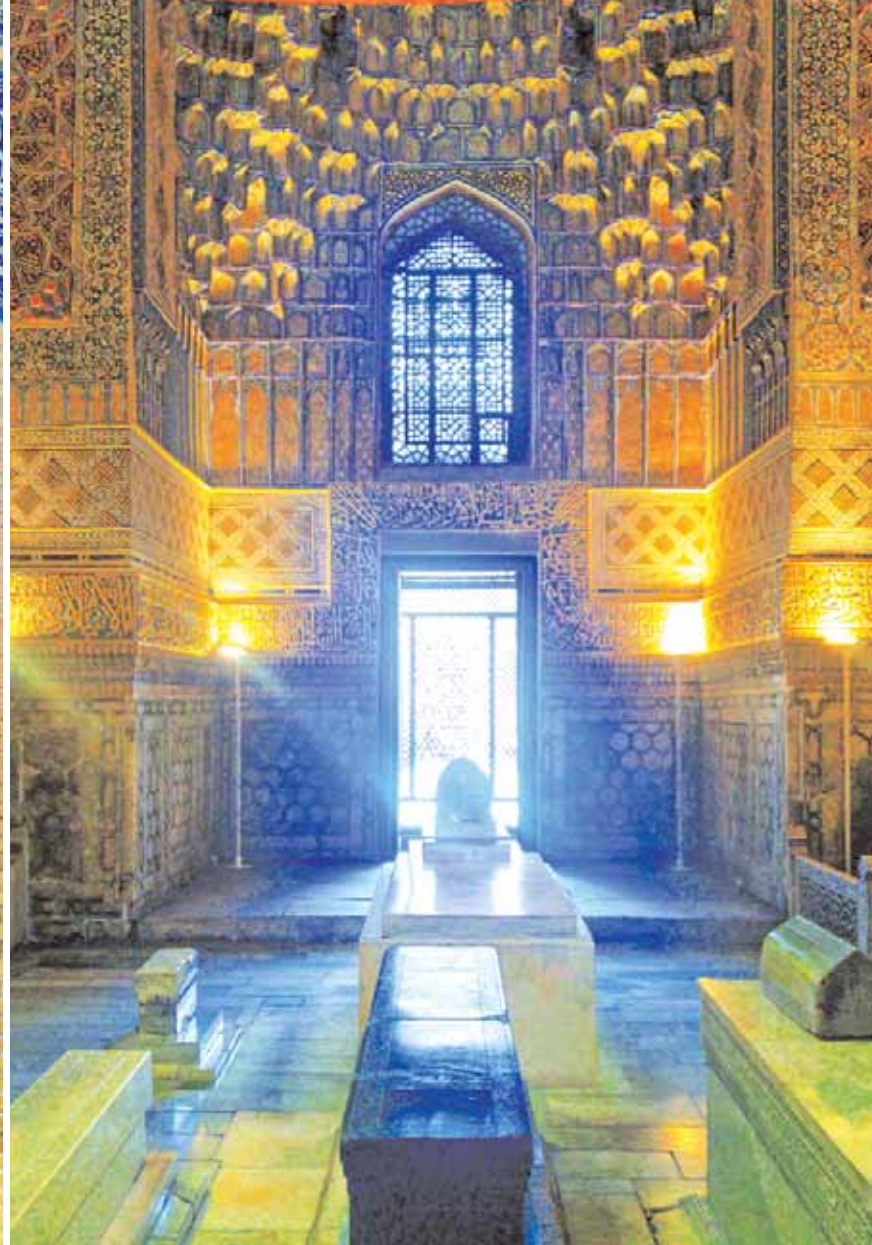
Samarkand imbibed not just cultures and traditions but also arts and crafts from different parts of the world. The Sogdians learnt paper-making from Chinese traders and improved upon it such that Samarkand's silk paper came to be known for its superb quality. Many ninth and 10th century Persian and Arabic manuscripts were written on it and considered as royal paper, only *emirs* could afford it. In the tiny village of Konigil, 10 km from Samarkand, I visit Meros Paper Mill where the owners are reviving the ancient art of making paper from mulberry bark. I watch two women industriously scraping and cleaning the bark. It's then boiled and beaten to pulp before being pressed into sheets. Once the sheets are dried, one of the mill workers polishes them with granite stone. The end result is a smooth, pale yellow paper that is long lasting and a joy to touch, and, of course, to write on. The paper mill has a gift shop and I pick up a couple of bookmarks made with the silk paper.



## BUILDING BLOCKS

A rampaging Genghis Khan invaded and destroyed Samarkand in 1220, killing thousands of people and levelling their homes, markets and the citadel. Instead of rebuilding the city at the same spot, the locals moved a bit south. But the real resurrection of Samarkand happened in the 14th century when Timur or Tamerlane formed the Timurid Empire and made Samarkand its capital. He built a central high street lined with shops to encourage trade and revive the merchant economy. He was a great patron of the arts and was constantly building grand new buildings in a style that came to be known as Timurid architecture. It is often considered the peak of





Timur is buried in Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum that has been restored to its former glory

Islamic art in Central Asia characterised by patterned turquoise tiles adorning terracotta façades and massive azure cupolas crowning the buildings. A prime example of this is the Bibi Khaym Mosque near Siyab Bazaar. Timur built this with the loot he brought back from his infamous sack of Delhi. When it was built, it was the largest and most stunning mosque in the Islamic world. Another must-see Timurid marvel is Shah-i-Zinda, a sprawling necropolis with tombs ranging between 9th and 15th centuries. There are plain headstones and elaborately decorated mausoleums but the most important structure here is the (supposed) grave of Kusam ibn Abbas, Prophet Muhammad's cousin.

Timur himself is buried in Gur-e-Amir, a stunningly decorated mausoleum that has been heavily restored to its former glory. It holds not just his tomb but also those of his two sons, two grandsons and that of his teacher Sayyid Baraka.

Interestingly, Samarkand's most iconic architectural masterpiece was built after Timur's time but it nevertheless follows his style. Registan stands in the heart of the city, a grand square that was used for everything from weekly markets to royal proclamations to public executions. The square is flanked by three madrasah built between the 15th and 17th centuries. The oldest is the Ulugh Beg Madrasah built by Timur's son Ulugh Beg, a stunning edifice with a mosaic-tiled entrance arch, soaring minarets and an inner courtyard with a mosque, lecture rooms and dormitories. The other madrasah are the Sher-Dor Madrasah and the Tilya-Kori Madrasah, the former especially interesting for the tiger mosaics depicted on the arched gateway, a decidedly un-Islamic motif (Islam bans the portrayal of living beings on religious buildings). But then that's Samarkand, standing at the crossroads of world cultures and embracing everything that comes its way.