



Souvenirs From the Silk Road

Once at the crossroads of Central Asia's caravan routes, the ancient cities of Uzbekistan remain a treasure trove of classic Islamic architecture, with a flourishing arts and crafts scene that proves just as compelling.

— by Charukesi Ramadurai

Standing under the vaulted ceiling of the Toqi Telpak Furushon, one of several medieval trading domes in Bukhara, I found it easy to imagine a time when this sleepy Uzbek city was a hub of commerce and culture. Situated along the ancient network of caravan routes known as the Silk Road, this is where traders and merchants once stopped to rest and exchange goods on their long journeys across Central Asia.

As I ambled through the 16th-century bazaar, now taken over by souvenir stalls and craft studios, my eyes kept wandering to the displays of delicate scissors outside one of the shops. Elegantly curved with bird-shaped shanks and beak-like blades, they seemed to call out to me. And that was how I ended up not just buying a pair of scissors I didn't know I needed, but also going in search of the master blacksmith who revived this almost-extinct craft a few decades ago.

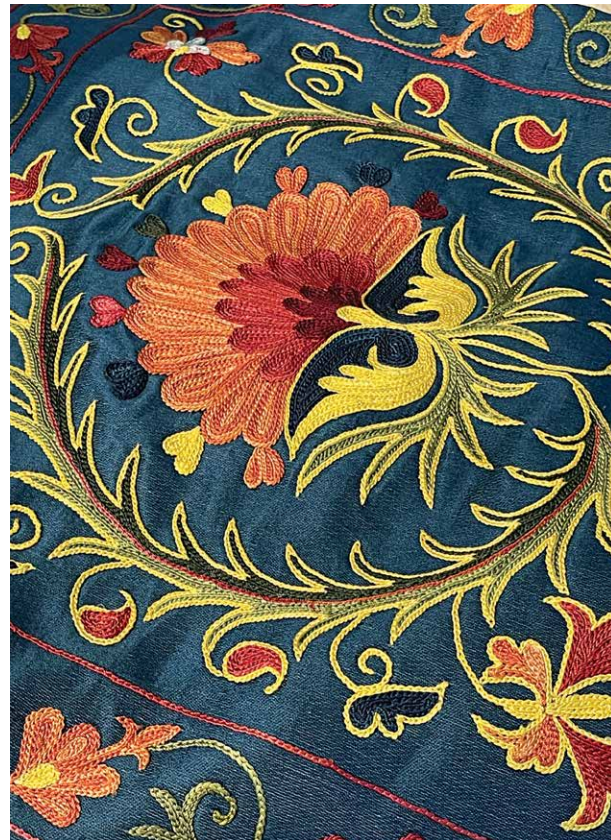
Sayfullo Ikramov, I soon learned, had

LOOKING SHARP

Above, from right: Bird-shaped scissors at the Ikramov family workshop in Bukhara; a sixth-generation potter at the Gijduvan Crafts Shop.



TRADING PLACES
Left to right: A souvenir shop at an old madrassa in Samarkand; scissor-making blacksmith Salimjon Ikramov; intricate, hand-embroidered *suzani* textiles can be found across Uzbekistan; one of Bukhara's ancient trading domes now serves as a bustling tourist market; a miniaturist at work in Bukhara.



passed away recently, but at the atelier of **Salimjon Ikramov** (6 *Khakikat St.*, opp. *Omar Khayyam Hotel*), the fifth-generation metalworker recounted how his father had found the design for the bird scissors in an old book and begun forging them again with his three cousins. Shaped like storks, kingfishers, woodpeckers, and pelicans, the tools are ideally suited to the delicate embroidery work for which Uzbekistan is famous. They're delightfully whimsical, but also razor sharp, much like the sturdy knives displayed alongside them.

Almost extinguished during the Soviet era, traditional Uzbek craftsmanship experienced a strong revival after independence in 1991, and today, this doubly landlocked country (one of only two in the world, the other being Liechtenstein) of 36 million people is once again a trove of artisanal treasures. Take *suzani*, a type of hand-embroidered textile that dates back at least to the time of Timur, the legendary Turkic-Mongol conqueror who ruled over Persia, Mesopotamia, and much of Central Asia in the 14th century. The exquisite needlework is done exclusively by women, trained from a young age to work on bedsheets and tapestries that eventually become part of their dowries. In all of the Silk Road cities I visited in Uzbekistan, I encountered ladies,

young and old, bent over pieces of cotton or silk cloth, their hands moving the threads with an innate rhythm. And so it was at the **Gijduvan Crafts Shop** (folkceramic.uz), where more than 40 local women are employed in making and selling gorgeous *suzani* textiles. The workshop also doubles as a ceramics gallery, introducing me to the region's centuries-old pottery traditions. These were not the bright and shiny cookie-cutter plates and bowls that I had seen in the markets elsewhere, but objects expertly crafted by hand using natural methods and dyes. I purchased a serving platter decorated with a cheery pomegranate motif before tearing myself away to catch the express train for Samarkand.

Some 300 kilometers to the east in Samarkand's dazzling Registan Square, I met shop owner Dilshod Abdulkhaev at his tiny **Dil-Suzani Boutique** (998-90/212-2297) inside the inner courtyard of the Tilya Kori Madrassa. He spoke about how crucial it was to preserve age-old arts like *suzani* as he showed me some of his most interesting pieces, whose lush colors and designs gave them the finish of fine paintings. But it was only at the **Samarkand Bukhara Silk Carpets Factory** (samarkandsilkcarpets.com) that I truly appreciated the extent to which working on such crafts has helped Uzbek women. Most of the

400 employees here are women, trained straight after school in *suzani* embroidery and carpet weaving. This gives them not just some much-needed financial freedom, but also status in an otherwise patriarchal society.

The factory is owned by the Badghisi family, who have been in the carpet business for over 200 years. During my morning visit, more than a dozen ladies were at work, the hypnotic clickety-clack of their looms echoing through the vast rooms. The mustachioed manager, Abdulahad Badghisi, was on hand to show me around, his passion shining through in the way he spoke about threads made by mulberry silkworms and dyes extracted from walnut peels.

Another day, I followed the carpet trail to the desert city of Khiva in Uzbekistan's remote southwest. Here, amid the mud walls and minarets of the ancient fortress town of Itchan Kala, is the **Khiva Silk Carpet Workshop** (khiva.info/khivasilk), set up two decades ago by Christopher Aslan Alexander with funding from UNESCO and Swedish relief organization Operation Mercy. It's a fascinating story that he documented in his 2010 memoir *A Carpet Ride to Khiva: Seven Years on the Silk Road*. A Briton who grew up in Beirut, Alexander has long departed from Uzbekistan, but his impact on the community

continues today, as witnessed by the workshop's young craftswomen weaving and embroidering their way to a steady income. And their carpets are some of the most beautiful I have ever seen, with whirling floral patterns and motifs that draw on the architectural decorations of the city's medieval monuments.

I went to Uzbekistan for the blue-tiled mosques and madrassas, and discovered the country's rich art and crafts heritage through happy serendipity. Like the collapsible x-shaped *lauh* bookstands — originally meant to hold Qurans but now equally useful for iPads — shaped from a single slab of walnut by a master woodcarver in Khiva. Or the intricate miniature art created by **Davlat Toshev** (fb.com/davlat.toshev) at his Bukhara studio near the Lyabi Hauz complex. Or the mulberry bark-paper notepads and handbags made by hand at the Mukhtarov brothers' **Meros Paper Mill** (*Konigil Village*) on the outskirts of Samarkand.

In each town, I came across seventh- and eighth-generation artisans quietly carrying on their family traditions with pride and grace, never once pestering or scolding curious tourists who just wanted to stop for a photo. Were it not for the pesky baggage allowance on my flight home, I would have gladly bought something from every single one of them. ☺

Silk Road Essentials

GETTING THERE
Uzbekistan Airways (uzairways.com) connects the Uzbek capital of Tashkent to Jakarta, Bangkok, and Kuala Lumpur.

WHERE TO STAY
The best bets for accommodation include the year-old **Samarkand Regency Amir Temur** (silkroad-samarkand.com; from US\$150); Bukhara's **Lyabi House** (lyabihouse.com; from US\$70), once the home of a 19th-century merchant; and the cozy **New Star Boutique Hotel** (hotelnewstar.uz; from US\$65), which occupies a former madrassa building in Khiva.