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سilk & Magic

Central Asia - Siberia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan



Preface

The Soviet Union was a highly artificial and notorious country. However, how many people would think that it was a truly beautiful one, too? Since it was the largest country on the planet at that time, surely it must have also been the prettiest one, the most diverse and intriguing.

Between 1922 and 1991, the country consisted of republics which represented so many different historical, cultural, religious and ethnical backgrounds that it beggared belief that they had survived tied unnaturally together for so long. Those ones, located in central Asia were particularly exotic.

Once they were grouped in one or two large republics, including the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, comprising the historical area of the Turkic people. Then, in 1924, it was divided into Turkmen, Tajik, Uzbek, Kirghiz, and Karakalpak republics and regions.

When the union collapsed, the majority of the republics (apart from the federated Russia) re-emerged as independent states. Some of them troubled, engulfed in internal conflicts and some re-introducing their own version of totalitarian regime. Is Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan some of them?

And so, when time came to make a decision about where to go to see the total eclipse of the sun on 1 August 2008, I chose Siberia. It was not my immediate choice. I kept thinking about China and Mongolia. But when my friends went on a push bike around the globe tour for two years, and planned to be on the eclipse's totality line in Siberia, I decided to meet them there.

By the time they set off, on 3 July 2007, I had still not agreed with them the precise location of our rendez-vous. The total eclipse was going to pass through Novosibirsk, Biysk and Gorno-Altaysk, among all many other places in the vicinity, of course.

Novosibirsk, Siberia's largest city, was a great gateway. I could easily get an airline ticket there via Moscow or Ekaterinburg. It therefore seemed a very logical place to start my exploration of central Asia. At least that time round.

Itinerary

My curiosity grew as I began looking through various resources what else, apart from Siberia, I could see in the region. There were many great and rather exotic places around. At that time, I did not want to think too much about the administrative hassle that was to come regarding visas, etc. I just

wanted to see as much as possible. As usual.

I slouched over my computer over the entire weekend. My first draft itinerary was focused on key historical places in Uzbekistan and the formal capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty, from where I was supposed fly back home.

Gradually, however, I kept adding more places to the plan. Two more cities in Uzbekistan, then one more in Kazakhstan and I also changed the finish line - from Almaty to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan.

And, as I was relatively happy with my plan, I had a feeling that somehow (and totally unlike me) I was planning to spend too much time in one place - the Novosibirsk area. I could not afford that. I knew that even if I stayed two days in that city, I would be bored. So, I looked up a few flights in the region and swiftly decided to add Irkutsk and Lake Baikal to the route. Lake Baikal has always been on my wish list. My parents have a Russian photo album about this world's deepest lake. It is perhaps the most stunning book in their collection.

I could not stay at the lake for very long, however I was hoping for a long, full day exploration trip.

Then, I thought it was enough in the entire plan for twenty days.

Had I booked all my flights at the time of creating the itinerary, it would have worked. I waited too long, and by the time I was ready to start buying the tickets, the flights became full, and I had to drop the idea of going to Irkutsk and Baikal.

However, in the meantime, I discovered a guidebook on Kyrgyzstan published by Bradt. I flipped through a few pages and saw the photographs. I amended my plan almost immediately. The book recommended a few nights in the nomadic house and visiting the famous Karakol town, where certain scholar discovered a wild species of horse, the Przewalski's Horse. I did not have much room to manoeuvre, but I squeezed time previously allocated to Kazakhstan and allowed one more day for Karakol. This would not necessarily be enough for seeing the mountains or staying at the yurt tent, but the route between Bishkek and Karakol runs along the highly picturesque and world's second largest mountain lake, Lake Issyk-Kul.

As usual, the UNESCO World Heritage List was very helpful in the route selection process. Well, I had a pretty good idea what I wanted to see in Uzbekistan. When I was contemplating the idea of taking an overland trip in eastern and central Africa with Dragoman, I ordered their brochure and I saw that central Asia was also one of the

routes they offered. I did not go with them to Africa, but the pictures in the brochure showing a few places in central Asia were amazing. I immediately placed Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan on my target list. And so, this solar eclipse and my friends' trip came handy!

The World Heritage List included: Khiva, Bukhara, Samarkand, Shakhrisabz in Uzbekistan, Golden Altai Mountains in Altai Republic, and Turkestan in Kazakhstan. I thought they all could find their way into my schedule. The sites in Uzbekistan were relatively easy to connect with one another. They were either on the main air routes or could be visited by train. Turkestan appeared doable with its road connections to Shymkent, a sizeable town with an airport.

The Golden Altai Mountains were a bit more remote in comparison. However, a few tour agents in Barnaul offered organised trips. I am never fond of organised group tours as they always proceed at a slower pace. I was therefore hoping to there were a few other options using public transport.

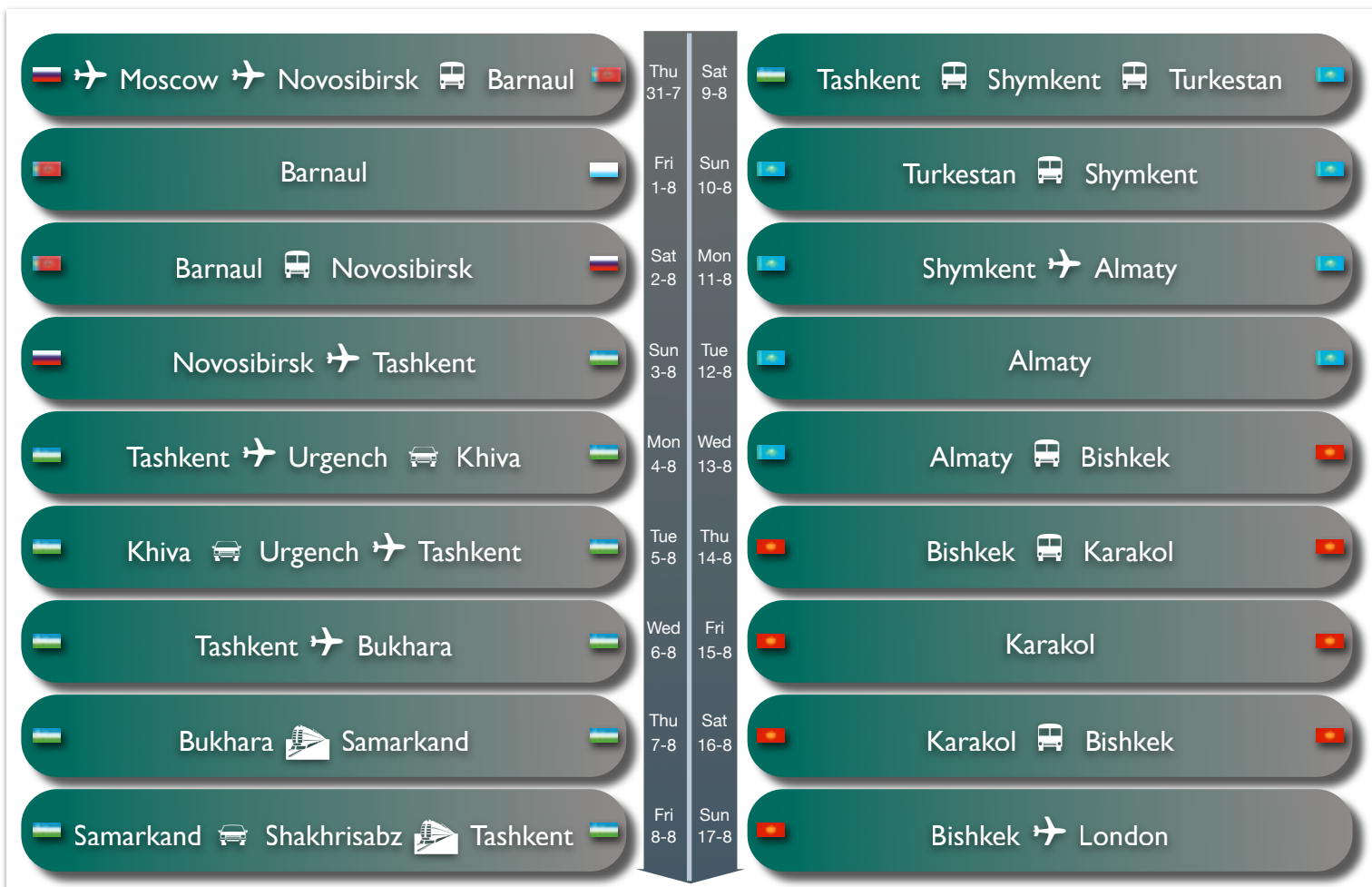
So, with the assistance of the UNESCO World Heritage List, an occasional glimpse of a guidebook, which I did not buy, and a few websites of local airlines, the plan was complete. It was good. The trick was to stick to it.

visas

After I had my route figured out, time has come to apply for the visas. I needed three visas - Russian, Uzbek and Kazakh. After browsing through the websites of respective embassies, I realised that the most cumbersome process was going to be with the Uzbek visa application. For some ancient reason, the republic required travellers to obtain an official letter of invitation from a person or travel agent based in Uzbekistan, confirmed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This was going to take time, of course. And cost a lot more money, naturally. The travel agent, Roxana Tour, whom I found on the internet, charged USD50 for the service.

They took almost three weeks to issue the letter of invitation, which looked like I could have issue one myself. That was a long time, and pushed it to almost the very last minute. There were no official stamps or evidence that the letter was approved by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Roxana Tours required a formal letter issued by the applicant's employer confirming the applicant employment status, and a tour being booked through them or at least three nights of accommodation booked via their



office. I was not very pleased with that, but I forced them to book hotels, which I wanted. And convinced them to assist me with the booking of the internal flights and trains.

The consular section of the Uzbek Embassy in London claimed that the visa processing may take approximately 10 working days, unless it was pre-arranged. There was no explanation what 'pre-arranged' meant and I began to worry, when I only had one full week until my departure after receiving the inconspicuous letter of invitation. I had rush to the embassy, despite a rather busy week at work.



Anyway, the embassy took from Monday until Friday to put the visa in my passport, and charged GBP47, which I thought was expensive.

In the meantime, I managed to obtain the Kazakh visa using my other passport. This one was the easiest. Republic of Kazakhstan did not require any specific documents or papers. Travellers were only required to submit two copies of an official application form, available from the embassy's website. The visa processing was taking 24 hours, and the cost was GBP20 payable by credit card or check only.



When browsing the pages of the Russian embassy, I understood that the only requirement for obtaining an entry visa to the Russian Federation was an official hotel booking. That was in fact misleading. Russia required an official letter of invitation, like Uzbekistan, and a travel voucher obtained from a tour agent based in the Federation.

Suddenly, I felt slightly uncomfortable that I had only few days to get one of those, somehow. Fortunately, waytorussia.com offered a rapid service of providing both the letter of invitation and the voucher electronically directly from their website. The process cost USD30 for one day service and USD45 for same day service, provided they were contacted during working hours, Moscow time. The documents arrived in PDF format to a designated email.



Russian Consulate in London issued visas either the same day, which cost GBP95 or within a week for GBP50. They never guaranteed the same day service, as this depended on the number of applications. I was lucky and got my visa the same day. It was too late for the one week service.

I really hated all that process. Why would the states not want to welcome travellers and stamp their visas on arrival, like Kyrgyzstan? This way, Kyrgyzstan enjoys a reputation of a friendly, hospitable and welcoming country, and cashes on tourism pretty nicely. This way euros, dollars and pounds flow in easily, growing the economy and giving the locals jobs in the industry.

The Silk Road

The legendary - no, wait! - the historical route from the Far East to Europe. It was starting in China (Sinae) and ran to Rome and Athens via present Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran (Persia) and Syria. Over the centuries, branches of the Silk Road grew to follow trading routes running through India and Arabia, as well as by boats on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea.

The trading route was not reserved for silk only, but it was associated with the transport of luxury items like pearls, diamonds, satins, rubies, musk and, yes, silk. The extend of the road stretched over 8,000 kilometres on land. It has never been proven or insisted that it was travelled from end to end by many. Although, there were a few.

It was started in the central Asian part around 100 BC by the Han Dynasty of China on the back missions and ... tourism. The Han Dynasty is considered at home to be one of the most important and greatest periods in the history of China. To this day, people of China call themselves also the Han people. It influenced the cultures and religions of Vietnam, Korea, Mongolia.

There were earlier trading routes in similar trajectory, however it is believed that it was the Silk Road that contributed to the blossoming of the civilisations in Byzantium, Rome, Arabia, Persia, India, and of course China.

The route had eventually a few branches, and they passed through the following places (in no particular order):

- the Gansu province of China
- the Taklamakan Desert in Kyrgyzstan
- Kashgar in China
- Turfan in in China
- Talgar in Kazakhstan
- Almaty in Kazakhstan
- Kokand in Uzbekistan
- Merv in Turkmenistan
- Bukhara in Uzbekistan
- Samarkand in Uzbekistan
- Astrakhan in Russia

The itinerary for this trip included only Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan, Bukhara and Samarkand, both in Uzbekistan. I could try to go also to Kokand, but it was in a remote part of Uzbekistan, near the border with Kyrgyzstan, in the area, which was not considered terribly safe.





Initially...

Siberia is not a word that is loved at the first sight. The history ruined the region's reputation for generations to come. The thing is that it is ruined for all those who had never been to Siberia and never touched its beauty. It is a obviously a land of extremes and its nature has to be respected. Otherwise consequences could be dear.

High school literature taught me that Siberia was synonymous with evil, genocide and destruction of all what is human dignity. Therefore my expectations regarding Siberia were unnatural from the outset, long before I knew that there might be a day I was actually going to visit this part of our wonderful planet.

But, I put on a brave face and decided that all this was not going to ruin my experience.

And I have to say, that Siberia was a real shock to me. This shock did not make feel good about me at all. It was positive. I was pleasantly surprised that this part of the world could be so nice. The fact that I was there in the middle of the summer was a massive plus, but the vastness of the landscape and the nature impressed me.

From the other hand, it was so far from civilisation, that it was scary. But for a real traveller and explorer this obviously must be a good feeling.

When I arrived, half of the myth about Siberia was gone. It was not filled with evil in every square inch of its territory. It was not dark and scary, cold and rough, uninviting and impossible. It was lovely instead, with plenty of space and nature so natural that it felt unnatural, almost as if it was all engineered. Its distance from all things civilised would not make it a place of choice to settle and live. But it was not hell.

My mind tried to compute all this reality so different from my expectations. Well, at least at that time, anyway. Things were not all rosy, of course. And I raised my eyebrows on a number of occasions. A few things surprised me (this is what travelling is for anyway) and a frequent sense check reminded me that things might operate differently and such scarcely populated territory was going to exhibit somewhat differently to London, Warsaw or New York.

Novosibirsk

I was ever so happy that the coach bringing me to the capital of Siberia took one hour shorter than advertised. It was terribly hot inside and the driver kept switching some sort of air conditioning on and off, every twenty minutes or so. The coach was small and old yet fairly comfortable. It smelt of

dust a little as the seats covered with carpet-resembling material must have been sat on by millions of bottoms of all sorts. There was enough legroom however to stretch almost fully and hide a medium bag under the seat in front.

The coach struggled with every hill steeper than 5.5 degrees. It made two stops. The first one a little more than half way into Novosibirsk at a road-side restaurant 'Dilidzans' (Дилижанс). A nearby tent was selling rather yummy looking shashliks made of juicy beef and dry-ish pork and pale chicken. The stop lasted 20 minutes. The second one, lasting about 15 minutes, about an hour before arrival, in the middle of shabby looking town annoyed me. I could not see a point of stopping there at all. For me it only meant the trip taking much longer, and unnecessarily longer. In turn, translating to less time to discover Novosibirsk. I am always getting so impatient when in transit between A and B, regardless if I am travelling alone or with someone. Certainly, this somewhat depends on the mode of transport and what I can be doing during. Company of fellow travellers often helps but is not always a guarantee of the trip's length feeling a bit less painful.

When I arrived at the bus terminal of Siberia's capital, I could not decide in which hotel I should stay. I did not book anywhere, and since I was going to stay only one night, it did not really matter that much, where I was going to end, provided it was going to be easy to get to the airport easily and the place was not going to nuke my budget.

At the bus terminal, I thought I was going to find my way on my own, but I was a little tired with that ride on the bus, that I gave in and hailed a taxi. I immediately entered into an argument with the driver, who wanted to take me for a ride regarding the price. I had to control myself not flip out completely, but I was livid. The guy, in his early fifties, dressed in simple fabric pants, black leather jacket and holding two mobile phones, asked for a price almost ten times higher than it should have been. He insisted that it was the price I needed to be pay, because I was a foreigner. I told him that he was a racist and that he should at least show some respect that I learnt Russian and managed to have a row with him in his native language.

He lowered the price by about 75% and I agreed to go with him. With great reluctance. But I had enough.

I checked into the hyper drab Soviet style, massive Hotel Novosibirsk, opposite the Trans-siberian Railway station. It had a tastefully renovated lobby and about half of the rooms going for 4600 rubles. I took the unrenovated one for 2500 rubles! I only chose this hotel for convenience. Between the station and the hotel, a shuttle airport bus ran every half an hour, charging 60 rubles. It was actually a modern, comfortable and air-conditioned coach.

The station was a great sight. It was an attraction in its own right. I am not sure if this station was the largest on the Trans-siberian Railway, but it was a palace. Massive and flamboyantly decorated. For some strange reason no photography was allowed inside the station, and I could not possibly steal a shot due to ridiculously large presence of security staff. But I snapped a few happy shots from the outside and from my hotel room window. Perhaps one of the better qualities of my room, whose bathroom was, hmmm.... disgusting. And the smell of the carpets was, for a lack of a better word, intriguing. I could not be fussy. Few hours on the bed, and I was going to be out of there for good, with little chance to ever go back there.



Uh, before I forget, a Russian church near the bus terminal was built, allegedly, in the exact geographical centre of Russia. I would have not known that had a taxi driver not told me. Novosibirsk inhabitants were always glad to point it out to anyone who happened to look like a visitor and who had a pair of ears.

Adjacent to the Hotel Novosibirsk, the Beerman & Grill, had simple décor with parquet floor, high wooden tables with stools, low wooden tables with benches, and mix of regular tables made of wood and aluminium with wooden chairs.

Menu included sushi, sashimi and yakitori, which was highly surprising but having seen a Japanese-looking man wandering around the open kitchen was reassuring. The place however seemed to specialise in grilled dishes that would go well with the fifteen types of draft beer they were offering. Sausages, shashliks, steaks, cutlets, and a few items of seafood dominated the paper menu laid out on tables.

The open grill had a flaw, intentional or otherwise, as large clouds of grey smoke kept escaping into the dining hall slightly chocking the clientele. Perhaps it was made in purpose as the wow factor to accompany the open flames blazing tall out of one of the grills.

The waiting personnel was carefully picked to be attractive and very representative. The girls were stunning and the boys looked solid and very handsome. Some smiled more than others but prettiness made up for everything. And yes, they were professional and attentive. They spoke English and knew what was on the menu and how things were cooked, and what beverage was going well with what dish.

I went for the 250 rubles one litre Paulaner Hefe-Weizen to wash down my baked foreil fish from the Ob River served with herbed butter and baked potato for 310 rubles, and small chicken sausages grilled to perfection for 230 rubles served with two large onion rings and hot cabbage salad. Everything was yummy, and the Paulaner was like a magic medicine to the drabness of the monstrous hotel. Three pints down my throat and I just could not care less. And the fact that almost everyone in the restaurant was staring at me, my iPhone and my heavy FujiFilm S3 Pro DSLR camera stopped having any effect on me at all.

I Hefe-Weizened myself properly, hopped to the station again, this time for some nightly photographs and teleported myself to my bed, somehow. I was falling asleep content and looking forward to the rest of the holiday. So far, so good.

Biysk

Although I arrived in Siberia in its capital, it was Biysk that was my first Siberian city for me to explore, as on my way in, I just passed through Novosibirsk. Rushing to see my friends.

It took me almost exactly 24 hours to reach Biysk. I departed London on a 4 hours flight to Moscow, spent 6 hours on the Moscow's Domodedovo airport, jumped on a 4 hours flight to Novosibirsk, waited almost 2 hours for luggage to be offloaded there, then 0.5

hours on a taxi to the main, but very tiny, bus station, waited 0.5 hours for the bus, then 4 hours on it to Barnaul and finally, 2.5 hours on a shared taxi to Biysk, after having waited for it about for 0.5 hours. What a trip!

And I could have done it much cleverer. I could have flown from Moscow directly to Barnaul. The flight was departing Moscow about 2 hours earlier than the Novosibirsk flight, and was taking 4 hours. I would have saved at least 8 hours - that is a third of the time! Had I not checked in any bags, I would have saved even more time. Although, I had to check in all those sharp



spare parts for my friends' bikes, whom I was meeting in Biysk on their round the world biking honeymoon.

Biysk was not pretty. And I could stop right here. However, I think I ought to explain. It was a Siberian medium size town with grey concrete mass production prefabricated blocks of flats. Soviet authorities engineered Biysk to be relatively easy to navigate. It had wide alleys, main commuter routes with absolutely no character apart from being a typical Soviet, purpose designed midsize Siberian town. If that could be its main quality. And perhaps, from the urbanist point of view, it is.

And yet, in few places there were these small wooden houses, as if they were taken from an old cartoon or fairytale about Russian Siberia set in the times of Tsars; rustic, simple and authentic. Absolutely marvellous! Normally built from solid tree logs with small windows which had decorated frames painted blue. If only there was a larger group of those to form an 'old town', eh.

There were two patches of those houses. One patch was actually referred to as the historical centre, east of the bridge along the

norther bank of the river, with interesting examples of imperial architecture and a nice cathedral. The other one was by the loop of the 153 tramway. The latter had mainly crumbling ones, really looking rather sad.

Vastness of the surrounding nature in enormous measures made it feel that if Biysk was not at the end of the world, it must have been very close to a place where one could see it.

I could not believe how clean the large Biya River was. The waters were clear and had almost a tropical hue for a colour. A few beaches along its banks were an incredible sight. Who would believe that Siberia baked in 35C, fried on riparian beaches, and bathed in rivers? Biysk was!

The town was relatively close to the UNESCO listed Altai Mountains, and travellers sometimes stopped in Biysk on their way there, instead of the more pleasant Barnaul.

There was another quality that Biysk had. It fitted the stereotype of a forgotten Soviet little town, whose main avenue was named after Lenin and his massive statue was still standing at the most prominent spot of that avenue, and the crumbling old wooden

houses stood next to the concrete blocks of flats. Blocks that were nearing their shelf-life.

Biysk had few accommodation options and there was no hostel or camping. The only obvious place to stay overnight was the Hotel Centralnyi. It was an awfully drab Soviet style block with countless rooms. Barnaul was fully booked for the eclipse and in Biysk I did not make a reservation and they still asked me if I wanted a single room or a triple room (to accommodate my friends) and what standard I wanted!

Certain floors have been refurbished. I stayed at the sixth floor (in Russian seventh) in triple apartment 701, a single and twin rooms with a joint (refurbished) bathroom. It smelt strangely but when I opened windows it got better. It was RUB 900 (£ 20)

per person, had minimalistic decor and two TV sets, one even with a remote control. The room charge included rather good breakfast, complete with bliny, sausages, eggs, preserves, four types of bread, artificial juices, instant coffee and tea.

There bound to be places to go out in Biysk, given its sizeable young population, I thought to myself, and yet I did not spot





anything too obvious for a nightlife. Perhaps the beachfront cafes turned into clubs at night, I do not know. An obvious place, where there might be a club would be the hotel, but there was nothing there either.

Anyway, about half way between the Lenin's statue and the bus terminal, there was this large eatery called Caucasian Kitchen, which played some music from a tape and people danced. Inside, it was dark and cozy but the semi-open-air adjacent section had open grills and hosted most of the parties. These often ran into the hours of darkness. Three days and three nights in town, and that was the only spot where one could boogie into the night. A word of warning - due to the lack of tourists, one had to dance like the locals - holding hands with the partner and with lots of turning and twisting.

There are two alleys where people hang out. One leading from the Lenin's statue towards the new glass-and-marble building of the Russia Savings Bank, and the other running parallel to the bridge, ending at the beach. Yes, the beach at the river. There are two cafes at the beach, great for cold drinks and people watching and very poor for coffee (instant with powder whitener) and snacks.

The water in the river is remarkably clean and the beach is very busy in the summer when temperatures reach almost 40C. Sitting down and drinking cold bottled beer appeared to be like the core activity in Biysk, actually. When I was heading to Siberia, I never imagined that I would be seeing half naked people strolling down the streets, sweating from the heat.

The clean restaurant at the Hotel Centralnyi served yummy dishes, mainly Russian cuisine but a few fusion options were available. There were two menus. One very expensive, printed and laminated in a leather bound book, and the other - printed on regular paper and put in plastic sleeves. The latter had prices ten times (!) lower than the former, with delicious grilled fish fillet priced at RUB60 as the posh menu quoted from RUB 450 - RUB 600 for fish dish.

I ordered Ukrainian Borschtsch (RUB 170) from the expensive menu and the friendly waitress suggested I should get half portion, as 500ml might be too much for me, and of course half portion would be half price. Beer from tap 500ml was RUB40

I also tried restaurant called Kavkazkaya Kukhnia (Caucasian Kitchen) half way between the Lenin's Statue and the Bus Terminal. Their food was tasty and the service was very friendly but the majority of dishes (35 - 150 rubles) on the relatively comprehensive menu were not available.

Transport into Biysk didn't appear easy. There were only 3 trains to Barnaul a day, and about 6 buses to Novosibirsk. However, many shared taxis and privately owned minibuses served many routes as far as Novosibirsk and Tomsk. They left when full and could cost almost twice as much as the buses, e.g. a regular bus to Novosibirsk was 591 rubles, minibus van was 1,000 rubles.

Amanda & Olivier

Going as far as Biysk, as crazy as it might sound, had its purpose. Well, two purposes actually. First was the total eclipse, of course. But the second, equally important to me, was meeting with my friends - Amanda and Olivier. I met Olivier on Madagascar in 2001, on my first total eclipse trip, incidentally. They were travelling around the world on their push bikes, and I convinced them to amend their route, so we could

meet in Siberia for the eclipse. Since they were arriving from Mongolia, we had to agree a spot along the totality line, which we both could manage to reach in time.

It would have been the easiest to me to just stay in Novosibirsk for the celestial event, but it would have been too far for Amanda and Olivier. Biysk it was then. Neither of us knew how the town was going to be, so it was a pleasant thrill of discovering a new place, whatever it turned out to be.

I arrived ahead of time. I secured an apartment in the hotel, to make sure there would be enough room for us, and the massive bicycles. It turned out to be a luxury stay for my friends, who accommodated themselves in their tents and 'showered' in ice-cold rivers and springs.

We made contact via text messaging on our mobile phones, and they kept me informed how far they were from Biysk. They were running late. Their feet and bikes could only take them so fast, and getting a lift for two people, large backpacks, two large bikes, and a trolley was proving a major challenge. Only trucks and lorries could accommodate them. Uh, and a large estate cars.

It was nearing midnight. I got a message from Amanda that they were in Gorno Altaysk, about an hour drive from Biysk. I enquired at the hotel reception about a taxi service, which could bring my friends. I had everything arranged and contacted my bikers, but they decided to stay there for the night. They met a guy with a large car, who said he could put them up for the night and drive them in the morning. They thought it was very kind of him, but I had a feeling that it might not be such a great idea. The receptionist agreed with me. We texted each other goodnight, and I went to bed. At about 2 a.m. I received a text message from Amanda that the guy turned out to be a thief, robbed them and they had to call for the police. Nasty as it sounded, they fortunately were unhurt, and a taxi driver found in Gorno Altaysk (in the middle of the night) was already carrying them to Biysk to me!

I was very happy to see them arrive at the break of dawn. They were a lot of hugs and kisses! And a major relief!

The entire day we went on discovering the qualities of Biysk and enjoyed our company. They had stories to tell from all this biking

they were making around our marvellous planet. Including the Altai Mountains, which were just about three hours drive from Biysk, beyond Gorno Altaysk. My friends told me that they were worth the trip as the mountains were truly magical. But I had decided not to go there, when I plotted my route, as my itinerary was already tight as it was.

It was a great meeting, and we all three could not wait to see the total eclipse.

Total Eclipse

The plan was to see the moon covering the sun from the banks of the Biya River, but clouds gathered in the afternoon and I had to take an almost frantic decision to hire a taxi and drive towards the mountains, where there were no clouds. We found a clear spot in the sky with the sun in the centre and waited for the moon to do its business. Then, about a minute before totality, some clouds came and I almost did not see the eclipse at all! Fortunately, the cloud was thin and patchy and the sun sneaked through.





Foreword

The flight from Novosibirsk left on time. That made me happy after having just passed through a small mayhem. The Novosibirsk airport favours over employment. Within a distance of seven feet (just over 2 metres), my passport was checked three times by three people, two of whom stood next to each other. The passport control, operated by two desks, took over 1h45' and there were only 22 people in front of me! One of the immigration officers just wandered around, smoking cigis occasionally and knocking off peoples luggage without apologising. As if he wanted to make it clear that we were in the Asian part of Russia, and this was how things were supposed to be. If one wears a uniform, then others, who do not, can simply bagger off.

Anyway, the S7 airline served soft drinks and cold snacks, one of which was salted fish that tastes less than funny. Hot drinks were served from shiny silver pots, rather unusual

for an airline. I was pleased with the service. I studied my guidebook getting excited about Uzbekistan. It was rather inconvenient to get a visa to the country, and organising everything was relatively expensive, so I promised myself that I was going to enjoy this part of the holiday.

The Roxana Tour's way of working and the processes appeared slightly suspicious to me, and I had to negotiate to make them acceptable from my point of view. I was not keen to send hundreds of US dollars to a bank account somewhere in Latvia for a company in Uzbekistan. It seemed really odd to me. The visa was going to arrive late, anyway, and I thought that I could stall a little, saying that in case I was denied permit to travel to the country, I was not going to come. Therefore there was no point for Roxana to make all those reservations for me, booking air tickets, train rides and hotel rooms. I managed to convince them that by the time the money transfer was going to clear I was going to arrive anyway, and if I brought my money with me in cash, we could save the bank transfer fees, which were considerable.

Overall, I was very happy with Roxana in the end, and they really made a difference for me. However, on the airplane from Siberia, I did not know that yet, and kept wondering if their representative was going to meet me at the airport in Tashkent at all.

For my psychological wellbeing, I needed to convince myself that travelling to Uzbekistan was going to be worth the effort and I was going to get the value for money.

And that turned to be easily achievable. Really easily! The country was absolutely stunning, the people were incredibly friendly, moving from one place to another was surprisingly easy, and the prices of hotels, transportation and nightlife were great - very affordable. It was like a dream come true for a lone traveller - with so many attractions and wonderful experiences, in what turned out to be a very exotic destination, which became a true highlight of the entire holiday. By a mile! Fabulous weather contributed to the feeling of greatness and guaranteed the freedom of outdoor activities and provided a fantastic background for all the photographs I could take.

Tashkent

Tashkent welcomed me with temperature officially measured at 42C. I have no idea what it was in the sun, but I could feel my body panicking by generating several litres of sweat per hour. Last time I experienced temperature like that was in 2002 in Namibia, so my body could not remember well.

A very friendly representative of Roxana Tour, the agent who invited me to Uzbekistan, waited for me at the airport. His name was Rakhmatjon. He whisked me to my hotel in a new BMW. I quickly realised where my money was going. But he was very nice and his English was perfect. He handed me all the tickets and accommodation vouchers they arranged for me and gave me a free map containing all the main attractions in Uzbekistan. I invited him for a drink. He was very helpful in providing information about authentic and local places to eat out, drink and go out in

all the cities I was going to see. He later told me that he was the owner of the agency.

We went out. Rakhmatjon brought a colleague with him, Humayun, whose English was also perfect.

It was a great night. We could not stay out too long as it was Sunday and the lads had to work the next day. We had a couple of drinks in The Caravan and the Dudek Restaurant, and ended in the Diplomat Service club. We spoke about girlfriends, traditional and conservative ways of Khiva, Bukhara and Samarkand, and the reasons why people still spoke Russian everywhere. I was particularly difficult with questions about the language. Surely after 70 years of russification to convert back to Uzbek might not be an easy task. Rakhmatjon also said that Russian was fairly essential in the business space. I was still finding it a little weird. Yet, many Russians and citizens of the new states formed after the dissolving of the USSR, still lived in Tashkent, and Russian was a common language for them. So it did make some sense after all.

I really cannot put my finger at what I liked best in Tashkent. I think it could be the park at the Milliy Bog. It was set around a vast pond, where one could hire a boat and read poetry in it. Alleys shaded by giant trees surrounded the water, except one side, which was opening to some flamboyant state buildings. It was clear people had fun there in the park. Kids could jump on inflatable platforms and adults could test their drinking abilities at a few bars, one of which was set on a large wooden boat that resembled a galleon. Wide spaces were covered with thick evergreen lawn. When I arrived in the park at sunset, countless sprinklers looking like small fountains, created a great illusion as the fading sunrays contacted the tiny droplets of water making it glitter a little.

Near the park, by a rapid stream, a large number of jackass daredevils stripped down to their underwear jumped into the white rapids. The water looked remarkably clean - pale blue, like a glacial lake. I watched this risky business from a road bridge, which was shaking disturbingly every time a heavier





vehicle crossed. The guys really seemed to enjoy it, but for me it looked hair-raising. I was not sure this was a legal activity, but vehicles with more daredevils kept coming and increasingly more bodies went plunging into the river.

The capital seemed very orderly and laid back for the largest city in the Central Asia. There was hardly any traffic in the centre and the wooded pavement left an impression as if one was walking in a park. It was clean, too. Actually, in the centre there were a few small parks planted with massive trees almost entirely blocking the sun. Some parks had fountains. It felt more like a European metropolis, not a Central Asian one.

First of all, Tashkent was safe. I walked about the city at night and never felt uncomfortable. People usually did not take notice of me or were very friendly. Restaurants, cafes and bars in their multitude were teeming with locals relaxing over meals and drinks, listening to Russian pop music mixed with western golden oldies from the 1980s. It felt great and special. Particularly to me, who grew up behind the Iron Curtain.

Tashkent actually was rather weak for historical sights. Apart from three madrassahs (Barak Khan, Kukeldash and Abdul Kasym), two mosques (Namazgokh, Djami) one of which looked modern, and one Kaffal Shash Mausoleum, there was nothing significant. Still, the monuments were located almost in random places, among the high rise apartment blocks. The Islamic schools were in a bad state of disrepair, but money was being spent to renovate them.

For architecture enthusiasts the city was fabulous. Even the grey concrete blocks of flats unique. The facades with thousands of windows had the window frames shaped in Mughal arches, and parts of the sides of the blocks with no windows, colourful mosaics were painted. The state had built spectacular parliamentary and governmental offices. The new parliament building and the City Hall were my favourites. Their vast facades made sure the structures looked respectable but the constructions and many columns made them look light as well.

I stayed at the Grand Orzu Hotel, near the Israeli Embassy. They charged \$45 per

double, en suite and air-conditioned room, which was clean and comfortable. The entire hotel was tidy and safe. It looked a little like small chateau. Their small pool in the courtyard by the restaurant attracted a few guests, who cooled down after the exposure to temperatures of low 40s. The personnel spoke Russian, English and Uzbek and all were professional and polite.

Tashkent had a good number of hotels to suit most budgets, but not the lowest ones. If there were hostels around, they were hidden well as they did not come up on my search. Yet a few small hotels provided rooms for less than \$25, which was an excellent value by Western standards, and their facilities were generally much better than the price would otherwise suggest.

Tashkent was great for hanging out and killing time. The number of cafes and parks everywhere meant that both the locals and visitors were simply spoiled for choice. One of other interesting places to kill time and hide from the world was the Chorsu Bazaar in the north-western corner of the centre. It was packed with people trading absolutely everything, but everywhere you looked it

was like the green globes of the watermelon dominated the assortment. Every shopper had one in their hand! But watermelons are perfect in hot weather...

La Riva cafe close to Salvadore Dali restaurant offered German recipe beer and had free wi-fi, which for iPhone users like me was a bliss. Tashkent was full of small and simple cafes, many of which served unsophisticated meals, mainly from grill. Along Rustaveli avenue along the stretch of a mile, there were at least ten of them. And that's only one of the sides of the avenue! I am not even sure how many places for a beer and coffee were lined the other side.

Nightlife in the Uzbek capital was a sight in its own right. And what a wonderful choice of places, which could not outdo one another in glamour, trendiness and the quality of the sound system, repertoire and special programmes of the night.

Katakombo, a small cozy and glamour place with attractive girls wanting to be seen among good company, was delightful open-

air place wonderfully located by a gentle waterfall. Tables were positioned on a few platforms all facing the water and the bar. Music was fine and played loud enough for a club yet at levels allowing for conversation without shouting.

Diplomat Service, near Dedeman Silk Road Hotel, was just a big night club. I came when the club celebrated it's third anniversary. It had two dancing floors, both equipped for pole dancing, and a hall with three pool tables. That night a fruit platter was compulsory, and the table service was professional.

Club 25, near Grand Mir Hotel (formerly Russia Hotel), big but glamour place to boogie and watch people. FM Bar (formerly Broadway), was a small strip bar.

From all those places, there was a group of venues that definitely stood out in terms of the quality of decor, service and ... prices. It was the Caravan Group. They had pubs, bars and restaurants. It included: Ye Olde Chelsea Arms (a British themed pub), Izumi,

Park (Japanese styled venue), Pirosmani, Odesskiye Istorii (an Imperial Russia inspired venue), and Organic Food restaurant.

The Caravan, the flagship venue of the group, near the Israeli Embassy, was a restaurant with tasteful décor resembling eastern ancient stop point for travellers on the Silk Road. Tables were decorated with thick-woven cloth on which deep dark red, brown, yellow and green colours dominated. A band played live music. Service was patchy. The menu included both traditional Uzbek and European dishes. They made superb iced tea complete with fruit on the bottom of the tall glass. Long toothpick was served to pick them up. I loved the blackberries. Main dishes cost \$3-\$15, while the European dishes were most expensive. Prices were quoted in USD, but the bill was in sum, fixed with the rate of 1,350 sums to \$1.

Dudek Restaurant served Czech beer brewed on the premises, and classic beer-snacks such as sausages, croquettes, cheese sticks, bread rolls. It was popular and it had free





wi-fi! A band equipped with guitars, saxophone, drums, etc played exceptionally well and excellent mix of tunes.

I had to try the impossible Japanese-Korean restaurant, called Midami. If the Japanese could agree with the concept as they had occupied Korea in the past, the Koreans most definitely could not. The menu had a well balanced number of Japanese and Korean dishes. The Japanese cuisine was represented mainly by sushi and udon. The Korean options included mainly noodle soups and various stir-fried dishes. The food was authentic and, for a lack of a better word, perfect. The personnel, most definitely migrants from Korea, spoke both Russian and English. They were unsurprisingly polite but not entirely efficient. They made me wait quite a long time for my dishes, and I was the only customer in the restaurant at that time - later more people tricked in, and I struggled to figure out what was taking them this long.

I kept thinking why would there be immigrants from Korea in Uzbekistan. Why would this country be so attractive for the

Koreans, and then the lightbulb in my head made me realise that there were obviously two Koreas these days. For the Northern Koreans, Uzbekistan would have been a paradise. Compared with the regime-bound state of Kims, the growing capitalism in Central Asia must have been the closest thing to the land of freedom and democracy.

Not exclusive to Tashkent, but common in the country, was the following phenomenon. Every single car in the capital seemed to be a taxi. It was enough to stick one hand out and within seconds someone stopped to take you anywhere you wanted. Within the centre it cost from 2,000 to 3,000 sums (\$1.5 - \$2.2). If you speak Russian or act confident that you always use this service, there is no need to agree on the price. You just hand the driver money as you leave at the destination. I found it so convenient and so cheap, that I had to force myself to walking, so see the city better. It was also a great way to meet the locals and pick their brain about places to go out.

The city had a metro system, but it did not serve all the sights, and the stations were

located in the residential areas. But with the every-car-is-a-taxi system, it was totally unnecessary to learn the routes of the public transport.

In general, I was impressed with Tashkent. It turned out to be completely different from what I expected it to be. I expected more historical sights associated with the Silk Route, and a little bit more magic in the air. At the other hand however, I loved it for what it was; relaxed, organised, vibrant, friendly, outgoing, and very civilised. And I do not mean to suggest that Central Asia is not civilised. It is different. What I mean is that Tashkent felt safe, clean and logical. A great place to be for discovering various venues for eating out, partying, drinking, chatting, meeting people, making friends.

The border crossing between Tashkent and Shymkent (Kazakhstan) was closed in 2008 for rebuilding. Other border posts around Tashkent did not allow non-Uzbeks and non-Kazakhs to cross. There was also no though road transport between the two countries. There is more on this subject later, in the Kazakhstan chapter.



Khiva

Old Khiva is a small town packed with beautiful mosques, Islamic schools, minarets, museum - all surrounded by a great, wavy and thick city walls. It is a mesmerising and wonderful place to relax.

To see Khiva (Хива) I flew from Tashkent to Urgench on the internal Uzbekistan Airways' RJ85. The airline was not associated with IATA and their attitude to the safety on board was relaxed. People were allowed to move around the cabin during take off and ascend. The flight took 1h20'.

Khiva was just 30 km from the Urgench airport, and the best way to get there was by taxi.

Imagine this - a small place with no traffic, surrounded by fairy-tale like wavy walls with conical towers, narrow streets running between architectural wonders, little open-air cafes serving ice-cold drinks, markets selling giant watermelons and colourful

handicrafts, few people in the alleys, impossibly blue sky - all in the middle of the desert. Khiva is almost impossible to describe to give it full credit. It is one of the loveliest and most relaxing towns on the globe. Its ambiance is like taken from a perfect honeymoon film. No hassle, no bustle, no disturbance, no worries. And I was lucky to arrive on a rather balmy weather of high twenties on the Celsius scale. I heard that otherwise it could be really hot there.

UNESCO listed Khiva under the name of Itchan Kala, which is the formal name of the inner city of the old oasis surrounded by the walls, giving it the following description: "Itchan Kala is the inner town (protected by brick walls some 10m high) of the old Khiva oasis, which was the last resting-place of caravans before crossing the desert to Iran. Although few very old monuments still remain, it is a coherent and well-preserved example of the Muslim architecture of Central Asia. There are several outstanding structures such as the Djuma Mosque, the mausoleums and the madrasas and the two

magnificent palaces built at the beginning of the 19th century by Alla-Kulli-Khan."

The most striking sight in Khiva was the Mukhammad Amin Khan Madrasah with its tube-like tower. I am lacking words to adequately describe this structure. It was square well-based building with open courtyard inside. The sunken alcoves on the front two storey facade and the main gate were perfectly proportioned, nicely decayed with blue and seledine tiles but still non-extravagant. The tube tower was called Kalta-minar (Калтаминар) had a slightly wider base than its top and was all covered with yellow, blue, white and seledine tiles. One stripe surrounding the upper part of the tower cited the holy Quran.

I also liked the Islam Khoja Minaret, which could be climbed. The view from the top revealed all Khiva sights. The climb (1,000 sums) is a bit hazardous, as the wooden steps are narrow, steep and slippery and there is no light inside. The spiral stairway is only one person wide and the human traffic is not regulated.

The old town is very compact. People still live their normal life there. No-one pays particular attention to the visitors and there are not many of those anyway. Apart from occasional white satellite TV dish, there are absolutely no signs of modern life. There are no vehicles inside the walls and all buildings are authentic, apart from one, which is inconspicuous anyway. Everyone takes it easy in Khiva and children are very friendly, saying "hello", "hi", "welcome" trying their English, which they do at school. Khiva has been a tourist attraction for decades and yet the locals have not become blasé about it. They are patient and welcoming.

The ticket to all the museums in the old town valid for two days was 10,000 sum. Camera cost an extra 5,000 sum. That was fabulous value as the town could be explored in one day at a glacier pace. So if one wanted to chill in one of the open-air eateries, drink tea or coffee, or beer, then the two day ticket was perfect.

Khiva's sights were relatively simple and small. The key spots to visit included: the Pakhlavan Mahmud Complex, the Ota-Darvoza Gate, the Nurullabai's Palace, Oratash, the Kosh-Darvoza Gate, the Juma Mosque (with hyper unusual wooden richly carved columns and ceilings), Kalta-minar, the Muhammad Aminhan Madrasah, and the narrow alleys around the town within the walls.

All sights could be visited from inside out. Many wooden doors leading to palaces, schools or simply households were so richly carved that it beggared belief it was possible by human hand. Walking around, admiring the architecture felt like being inside a fairy-tale.

The old city walls were a sight on their own. Parts of the wall were in near perfect condition. Parts were crumbling photogenically, turning to desert sands, which was particularly visible as the conical

watchtowers resembled dunes more than important element of spectacularly fortified town.

A few teahouses and cafes were the places to kill time. Most of them took care to provide different form of sitting spots. They had regular European tables with chairs; raised sitting platforms in the Central Asian style where one sits shoe-less with their legs crossed in front of coffee table; and just carpets and cushions for maximum flexibility regarding body position. A few also had couches or sofas with footrests.

Other hiding places were the top of the minaret, where local couples snoozed and hugged while watching the life going on below in the old town. And the one was the top of the fortress, offering a panorama view of the old town from the other side. It was particularly very popular at sunset. Entry to both places was extra, but only about 1,000 sums and 2,000 sums, respectively.



Yes, there were bars in Khiva, but most were closing at 9 pm. Apart from the one at the Asia Hotel, I was told by the bar staff at the Asia Hotel (!). I did not verify this information, however my friend from Roxana Tour did warn me about the lack of nightlife in this historic town.

The bar at the Asia Hotel was empty. I was the only customer. I was chatting to the staff and eventually ended up ordering food there too. Then, the situation changed. Just before 9 pm, the bar became a lively scene for locals, who trickled out from the other bars. This way, I realised that it might have actually been true what the staff kept telling me about the Asia Bar. It turned into a bar full of fun, collecting people from the entire town, it seemed. Many bars, I heard, were closing doors at about 11 pm, and Asia was happy to keep going into the early hours of the morning. And even its swimming pool came handy!

The city was very conservative, so I did not meet any local girls. Only men went out at night as their wives and girlfriends stayed at home. I am not complaining. The chaps were fine and even a local heart-throb guitarist came to the Asia Bar to play some tear jerking local Uzbek and Russian love/yearning songs. It was a great, superb night, so full of action, but also very atmospheric and the ambiance at the bar in the wee hours in the morning, with the subdued light coming from flickering candles and the romantic songs sang with the gentle accompaniment of the guitar... I stayed until 4 am chatting with the local crowd talking about life and love, and the difficult times of the Soviet Union. I also had a pleasure to meet the owner of the hotel, so I had a chance to praise the personnel at the reception (a guy named Ali) and the two lads in the bar. He appreciated that and I learnt that as a local Uzbek entrepreneur he was very respected and liked in Khiva. I am so glad that Roxana Tour put me in that hotel! I would highly recommend them and they do trips along the Silk Road in all Central Asian countries.

The hotel, Asia Khiva, with lovely rooms for \$45 was located right outside the massive mudbrick walls surrounding the old town, with several dozens conical watchtowers. It was modern and half of the rooms had view towards the city walls. My twin room (#10) with the walls view was of a good size, had TV, two armchairs, wooden table, a small desk and a stool. The bathroom was modern, light tiles from floor to ceiling, shower cabin and it was mega clean.

The personnel was very helpful and real friendly. They smiled a lot, opened doors for you and ensured they checked with you every now and again to indicate that they





care. The service was truly five star in this two star venue.

Other places to stay (slightly cheaper) near the old town were: Khorezm Palace***, Khiva Madrassah***, Amelia**, and a few aged B&Bs within the inner old town, including Arkanchi B&B.

As for places to eat, right in the heart of the old town, the Milliy Taomlar served very simple Uzbek dishes. There was no menu, the owner's son recited the two dishes available that day. It was a chorpa soup with carrot, potato and a piece of beef, and pillau rice with red pepper and minced meat. The soup came with traditional flat bread, excellent by the way. The owner lady was welcoming and talkative and their Sarbast local beer was delightfully ice-cold. The setting of it was fabulous. It offered regular tables with chairs, but also Asian tables on elevated platforms with cushions or just cushions on the floor around a small coffee table. There were also separated semi-cabins if parties wanted more privacy. The

courtyard, as the restaurant was open-air, was shaded with parasols. Had the menu been slightly more comprehensive, this place would have been near perfect.

The restaurant at Asia Hotel had a menu with a mix of Uzbek and European dishes. They took about an hour to cook anything from the list, as the hotel had to wake up the chef and he had start everything from scratch. I ordered pierogi, which locally were known as manty. They were excellent and came with thick sour cream. I tried many manty in Uzbekistan and these were superb. The restaurant was empty. So I ate at the Asia Bar, across the swimming pool, while chatting to the very friendly bartenders and waited for the nightlife action to kick off.

Those who want to make a half loop of Uzbek UNESCO World Heritage Sites can take a taxi from Khiva to Bukhara for \$90. It is a five hours drive over the 470 km. For three people for example, this is an excellent value. Buses of course are much cheaper but can take almost twice as long, so if time is

money, then taxi might actually work out cheaper after all.

From Urgench airport, one can also take a trolleybus for next to nothing. The line goes directly from the terminal all the way to Khiva's old town. Once one of the branches led to the main gate, but it was no longer live when I visited. But the main line stopped at one of the other gates.

If one travels by air and does not want to take the trolleybus, it makes sense to pre-order a taxi, as they do not cruise the streets. And if one stays within old town walls, then there is no traffic there at all. This is just to reduce stress. The taxi drivers would normally offer a ride back if you took one from the airport.

I so did not want to leave Khiva. After having so much fun, in such an exceptionally beautiful place. If there was a place in Central Asia that I would recommend for a romantic engagement moment or a honeymoon trip it would be here.



Bukhara

Bukhara survived as a holy city even during the hostile Soviet times. It is endearing with its many madrassahs, mosques, mausolea and markets so unique in their form.

Bukhara is considered the third or the fourth holiest city in the Muslim world. Although there are a few of great places in Asia, which claim the same title. Bukhara is situated at the main branch of the Great Silk Road. It boasts flamboyant and superb architecture of the 140 madrassahs, mosques and mausolea. In Sanskrit, 'bukhara' means abbey.

Now, it is called 'city-museum'. The old town is full of very pretty sand-stone or mud-brick facades and buildings, including a huge fortress just outside the core centre. Its gigantic walls are not plain or straight. They are wavy, have countless circular bolts on them and conical watchtowers making the fort look pretty serious.

Bukhara's main attractions are confined within a 1 mile radius around the Maghoki-

Attari Madrasah. The only slightly more remote attraction is the Faizabad Khanaka, located about 2 miles from the old town, but although interesting one, it is not the most photogenic amongst the rest of the buildings. And it is best viewed in the morning with its facade facing east.

UNESCO listed the historical centre of Bukhara in 1993. For really good reasons: "Bukhara, which is situated on the Silk Route, is more than 2,000 years old. It is the most complete example of a medieval city in Central Asia, with an urban fabric that has remained largely intact. Monuments of particular interest include the famous tomb of Ismail Samani, a masterpiece of 10th-century Muslim architecture, and a large number of 17th-century madrasahs."

There is very limited traffic inside the centre, which makes exploring a true pleasure. It is like stepping back in time. Few trees provide little shade and temperature can climb over 40C in the summer, but there are a few little cafes scattered around selling cold drinks and domed markets are cool inside, too. During the Soviet times, some of the Islamic schools, including universities, were not maintained but remained open, unlike in

other towns in Uzbekistan. This is how the centre survived.

Most definitely, the unusual Chor Minor was my favourite monument. It dated back to the 19th century and was located within a relatively easy maze of the old town. A small boy, not older than five, spotted me promptly as I was getting closer to the monument. He looked me straight in the eye and repeatedly questioned "Chor Minor?". I figured that he wanted to be my guide. I said yes, and he led me to the monument. Then, he said "спасибо" as we reached the little piazza there. I gave him 1,000 for the service, which indeed made him happy.

The small structure had four disproportionately thick towers, or should I say about right ones. The most lovely looking little mosque this was that I have ever seen, cute and petit. It was magical. And it was located there among regular households, standing tall but not glorified. In fact it was disused. Someone adapted it as a storage.

Normally I am not very fond of markets but Bukhara's little ones based in multi-domed passages over main crossroads in the old

town, called tokis, had something cozy about them. The three main ones had names: Toki Zargaron, Toki Telpak Furushon, and Toki Sarafon. They housed little craft-cum-souvenir shops, or just tiny manufactures making things out of iron, steel or cloth. Their owners just sat there quietly rather being a nuisance touting. They would say "hello" or "welcome" and smile - no insisting or dragging into their shops. The tokis' domes resembled baths that I knew from Georgia, and that is why I found them intriguing.

I loved them particularly at night. They turned into mysterious structures resembling underground parts or secret passages of a castle. As they were built over regular crossings, one had to pass through them while walking about the town. The authorities had the tokis gently lit inside and that's what created the unforgettable mood.

The city offered plenty to see. The main photogenic attractions included: Faizabad Khanaka; Chor Minor; Namazgokh, Kalyan, Bola-Khaus Mosques; Kukeldash, Nadir Divanbegi, Maghoki-Attari, Ulugbek, Miri-Arab, Abdulla-Khan Madrassahs; Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka; Kalyan Minaret; Ark Fortress; Chashma Ayub; and Ismail Samani, Buyan-Khuli-Khan, Bakhoutdin Nakshbandi

Mausolea. In the southern part of the historic centre, near the Namazgokh Mosque, and in the west, by the Chasma Ayub, parts of the old City Walls remained.

Remarkably, the majority of the structures were bare, free from plaster or tiles, exposing incredible brick work. The combinations in which the bricks had been laid were beyond belief it was actually possible to use those to support the building and make it pretty, and substituted for any colourful mosaics. The most remarkable example of that masterpiece was the mausoleum of Ismail Samani. The way the bricks were used to create motifs in the facade were fantastic. There are no words to describe this. Some madrassahs did in fact had beautifully colourful tiles decorating their iwans, gates and towers, though.

I stayed at the Asia Bukhara hotel with rooms surprisingly prices at \$45, bam slam in the heart of the old town, near the Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka, was one of several perfectly located sleeping options, with four stars after its name. This is why I was expecting that it would cost about twice as much. Other hotels nearby included: Zargaron, Omar Khayam, Gulistan, Semurg, Bukhara Palace, and Zarafshan. Local Bed & Breakfast places complemented those, the

better looking were: Caravan, Grand Nodirbek, Siyavush, Sasha&Son, and Sasha&Lena. But there were many, many more small ones scattered around in the core centre. The facade of the Sultan Hotel looked particularly superb.

My room (#088) was just about right for size but it did not have any chairs or armchairs. The sole petit stool by the dressing table was the only alternative to the two single beds to sit down. Bathroom was new and well scrubbed. The hotel offered free toothbrushes and toothpaste. This is what probably earned it the fourth star. Yet, the room had a funny smell despite being located in the new wing.

The hotel had small and deep pool, but when I visited it was empty and created a health and safety hazard rather than a place to chill and cool down.

As for chilling, hanging out and killing time or perhaps spending quality time with friends and family, Bukhara had a few good options.

The Samani Park with the Ismail Samani Mausoleum had a play ground for kids so naturally families hang there. It had a few bushes and trees giving shade. The





Bukharians just sat on the lawns or high curbs and chatted. Some ate ice-cream or candy floss from the nearby fair.

The little fabulous park between Nadir Divanbegi Madrassah and Nadir Divanbegi Khanaka, surrounding a square pond enjoyed by three white ducks and two everhungry geese, was the best place to relax and adjust water levels. They lived in wooden miniatures of three most remarkable buildings in Bukhara floating in the pond, which in the afternoon converted into a fountain. The park, perhaps 150 yards square, boasted ten little cafes with tables under little trees surrounding the water that served cold drinks, ice-cream and simple but delicious dishes. Chicken shashlik was particularly yummy. They were extremely popular amongst the locals and visitors alike. The Lyabi House was the best with best service.

Nightlife was a low profile business in this holy town of Islam. At the Asia Bukhara Hotel, there were theoretically two places to party: the Bar Under The Moon and Asia Underground Nightclub. However, none of them saw any customers but me, when I visited. I was indeed warned about this. The

small terrace on the hotel's rooftop that was the Bar Under The Moon would only accommodate about 14 people, as this was how many seats were provided at the three small round tables. The club played disco music from the ancient 1980s.

I loved Bukhara at night in a different way, though. To wander around! The main sights were gently illuminated. The main quality was in the city's tranquility. The dark alleys saw no living souls. Walking around was like stepping several centuries back. No streetlights were on. The only hue of lightbulbs came from houses inside, through the windows, and from subdued spotlights pointing at the mosques' and madrassahs' domes. Mysterious! As if set in a one of the 1001 nights' fairytales about old lamps' gins and flying carpets.

Near Toki Telpak Furushon, by Omar Khayam Hotel, I dropped to a local open-air cafe for lunch, the Shakhristan. I had pielmieni, an Uzbek style won-ton soup with meat dumplings, full of chives, dill and baby onions. With black pepper it was nearing perfection. For the main dish I picked chicken shashlik. It was an unsophisticated spot, locally owned with relaxed service. It

was delightfully breezy and shaded from the sun by reed-woven sheets.

The old town had several other eateries, some with spectacular views. On the approach to the Samani Park had a few street vendors grilling shashliks for few hundreds sums and selling fruit and traditional bread.

A few great shashlik places were flanking the pond at Lyabi Khaus. The quality of the food was only challenged by the location. Arguably the best place in town for shashlik between three old masterpiece madrassahs and memorials. The pond filling the square was also a delight. The service was superb and the drinks cold. This is the most popular place for a chicken shashlik in town, and was often packed with local families.

A bar adjacent to the restaurant of the same name (same management) was equally popular. Their drinks were always cold and the personnel was very happy to bring food from the restaurant's menu. I chatted to one of the waiters, and he only proved my theory that the Uzbek people might actually be amongst the friendliest and the most open-minded nations in Central Asia.

After Khiva, I did not believe there would be another town in Uzbekistan to impress me so much. But I feel like Bukhara was almost on par with Khiva in terms of attractiveness, mystery and social life. Khiva was more lovingly cozy, because it was so nice and tiny. Bukhara, at the other hand, had more places and monuments to see and explore and there was more action and a few secret and magic places as well. And it looked incredibly stunning at night. I have to give it to Bukhara that the nights there were winning with Khiva. The illumination of the monuments and the gentle street lighting looked like from another world. I have no words to describe how mysterious, surreptitious, and cloak-and-dagger it looked. The dark empty passages, the hundreds years old facades, the stone pavements, the inexplicable enigma hanging in the air, filled with scent of lamp oil and spice.

The Bukhara train station was very far from the centre. Much farther than the airport. It was in fact in a different town. I did not manage to establish what public transport did the trip or how frequent it was. On the way, I spotted one minibus with a number, which might run from Bukhara. For the duration of 20 minutes that it took in a taxi



from the town that was the only public transport looking vehicle. A bit inconvenient.

About 200 yards from the station there was an ivory palace with the most elaborate facade I had seen for months. It was about 100 yards wide and the delicate and intricate reliefs-like and lace-like decorations were mindboggling. Had I had time I would have checked it most definitely.

My train to Samarkand left on time. Yet, the boarding was not free from shenanigans. The train personnel sold a few 'unofficial' tickets on the officially full service. It looked like a regular practice actually, as a few locals, including guides trying to accommodate tourists, kept approaching the conductors for that purpose. Oh, well. The train was comfortable and although time did not fly exactly, I was happy.





Samarkand

Samarkand has grown considerably overshadowing its remarkable monuments, many of which still require serious repairs after decades of neglect. What was restored stands proud and dazzles.

Samarkand's history spans over 2,750 years. Its monuments dating back to the Timurids Dynasty rival those of ancient Greece in Europe, Egypt in Africa as well as India and China. They just need to be brought back to their former glory. The process is well underway.

Samarkand had been the capital city of several empires.

I arrived by train and left Samarkand by train. I took the Shark Express from Bukhara (\$5, 2nd class), which took 3.5 hours. It had aircraft style seats in a clean, carpeted air-con carriage. The TV in the second class carriage blasted local pop music. It was impossible to have a kip. The Registan

Express from Samarkand to Tashkent (\$8, 2nd class) was even more comfortable or perhaps even luxurious. It had carriages with spotless compartments seating six in both first and second classes and nice carpets throughout. The first class had TVs in the compartments and that was the only difference (better or worse?). It was initially very hot, but when the air-con kicked in, it was actually pleasant. The tables inside the compartments had crisp white cloths and the train attendants (2 per carriage) served tea or coffee from colourful fine china bowls. It also took 3.5 hours. It also had aircraft style seats in a clean, carpeted air-con carriage. The TV in the second class carriage also blasted local pop music. But it was a good way to travel. I always liked trains. That was until I discovered the air travel.

Samarkand is one of world's most remarkable cities. UNESCO listed it in 2001. This is what the reasons were: "The historic town of Samarkand is a crossroad and melting pot of the world's cultures. Founded in the 7th century B.C. as ancient Afrasiab, Samarkand had its most significant development in the Timurid period from the

14th to the 15th centuries. The major monuments include the Registan Mosque and madrasas, Bibi-Khanum Mosque, the Shakh-Zinda compound and the Gur-Emir ensemble, as well as Ulugh-Beg's Observatory. The historic town of Samarkand illustrates in its art, architecture, and urban structure the most important stages of Central Asian cultural and political history from the 13th century to the present day."

The Registan Express to Tashkent (\$8, 2nd class) was even more civilised. It had carriages with spotless compartments seating six in both first and second classes and nice carpets throughout. The first class had TVs in the compartments and that was the only difference (better or worse?). It was initially very hot, but when the air-con kicked in, it was actually pleasant.

The complex of Registan could easily become a favourite spot. The small piazza is flanked from three sides by incomparable edifices of Islamic schools perfectly decorated with colourful tiles that make the spot dazzling. This place alone makes Samarkand famous. But I think that my

favourite spot was the Afrosiab's Shah-i-Zinda Complex. It was packed with nice little houses and memorials built by the Emperor Temur or his wife. Its gates and the narrow alley looked like they were taken from a fairy-tale about Sindbad, Ali-Baba's knights be the sesame that was opening at a spoken password.

Constructed along a narrow alley, the edifices were decorated with deep blue tiles with colourful painted patterns on them. The alley was ending with a tiny square, after a white gate. The square was surrounded with iwan-like facades glittering in deep navy blue and gold as the yellow floral patterns reflected the sun. It was so magical! Afrosiab must have been one of the most stunning complexes of monuments that I saw in Uzbekistan. Its magnetism dazzled. It was hard to believe that it was actually real. The structure was incredible and the harmony and premeditated logic of the place were electrifying.

The Juma (Jameh, Friday) Mosque, the main one in the Medieval Samarkand, had huge

gateways (iwans), amongst the largest I have seen. The frontals were so massive that they made a human being so insignificant. Not only were they tall but also exceptionally wide. They were built to be incomparable. For centuries, this mosque was one of the grandest in the world. The second iwan, at the opposite side, was astonishingly decorated with colourful floral tiles from all sides, not like most mosques, whose back sides had bricks left uncovered.

The structure had fallen into disrepair in the 17th century. Restoration, which had begun in the last quarter of the last century, has been bringing the mosque to its former glory. Results were already clearly visible when I visited (7 Aug 2008). Actually, restoration of the majority of the historic sites had been necessary and what's great that it continued and looked promising. The Soviets had not been interested in keeping them up.

The old town with its mosques and museums overgrown by a modern city could not keep a demanding traveller busy for

longer than a day. The main attractions of the historic centre were: Ak-Saray, Gur-Emir, Rukhobod, and Bibi-Khanym Mausolea; Ulugbek, Tillya-Kori, Sher-Dor Madrassahs; Bibi-Khanym and Khazrat-Khizr Mosques; Imam Al-Bukhari, Khoja Abdi Darum and Shakh-i-Zinda Complexes; and Ishrat Khana.

Most were seven minutes walking distance from each other. And three or four required longer hike or a short taxi ride. Even by taking a siesta break at mid day to escape being melted by 45C temperatures, most of the sites could be visited twice in a day, excluding a few museums, which, if done properly, would require half a day alone.

This is not a complaint, but appreciation of how convenient that was. All sights were marvellous and matchless. So it's about quality and not quantity! And if weather gets in the way, it is great to sit down at the many cafes and sip tea or a cold drink. Chill, gather strength and then go on...

I stayed at the Kamila Hotel (rooms for \$40) near the Registan was a lovely traditional





hotel. If I was a complainer, I'd say it was slightly out of town for my liking - 20 minutes walk towards the Registan along very busy road. And the room (#2) was smaller than a prison cell. It was obvious that the toilet cabin and the shower cabin were added after the architect of the building and the director of the construction died some years previously. But the room did have air conditioning, which for 42C weather was life saving. Free coffee and tea with no limit and an excellent breakfast included in the price made it a fairly good value, actually.

The family, who ran the place, were very friendly and helpful. They assisted me in organising a car for the side trip to Shakhrisyabz. There was internet access as well, but it did not work well, when I stayed there, so it could not exist for me at all.

Other options near or in the old town were: Malika B&B (\$35), and the more expensive hotels - Registan, Zarafshan, Central Samarkand, Afrosiab Palace and President Palace. I went to the Afrosiab Palace to check if they had free wi-fi in the lobby. They had not. When I checked the loos as

well, I was so unimpressed; filthy, smelly, no tissues, no soap, no towels! One would hope they don't charge more than \$40 there given the state of the facilities, but they charged twice as much at least. It was a total disgrace.

Similar to the other grand cities of Uzbekistan, Samarkand also had several places for relaxing and taking a breath.

Almost opposite the Registan, the Labi G'or cafe had two levels. Ground level, which was semi open-air and a terrace upstairs. Its sister kitchen on the pavement was specialising in grilling shashliks. Their draft beer, Pulsar, was nicely chilled and the pint of it was just 900 sum. The main kitchen served traditional dishes. I tried pielmieni. The portion was huge and the dumplings were nice, slightly better than adequate. But they were served with sour milk on a side, which was a bonus!

The fountain park along the Umarov street (I think) leading from the Registan to the Rukhobod Mausoleum had a few places to sit and relax. When the fountains were on, the gentle spray was a wonderful bliss!

Samarkand was big enough to offer a few other secret places to sit down and reflect on the world and its history...

How do I report on Samarkand's nightlife without potentially upsetting the Samarkanders, hmm... Well, honestly from a secular society one would expect a relatively positive and practical attitude towards partying, clubbing, etc. Yet again Samarkand had lovely Muslim traditions and therefore heavy partying had been kept at a very low profile. I failed to learn about any discos or clubs. And I had not partied since I left Tashkent...

For the teatotalers however, there was this delightful circular open-air tea house serving black and green teas, coffees and pastries. It was located just by the Registan in a park with giant trees, including pines and ... leafy ones, no idea about their names, but I'm sure some of them were platanuses. From the frequent attendance by locals I deduced it was a very popular meeting spot for catching up, chatting, gossiping, chirping, and sipping teas from small bowls, which in Europe had been replaced by cups, mugs or glasses. Lovely!



I was not quite sure what to do for food. During my touring of the city, I tried to keep lurking for a place to sit down and be served a quality, traditional Uzbek meal. It was not easy, as restaurants did not seem to be in abundance, for some strange reason.

I eventually ended up at the Labi G'or Restaurant & Cafe. I had manty with meat, which were large and great, and a small mutton shashlik, which was less than average. I loved the huge wooden terrace allowing plenty of breeze to pass through messing with haircuts and cooling foreheads and necks. Tables were wooden, their colourful cloths were protected by soft plastic films. They also had several Asian tables, i.e. raised sturdy wooden platforms with colourful cushions and coffee tables on top and in the middle of them, dressed with silk-like cloths.

I heard that the Karimbek Restaurant and the Regina Restaurant were also good. I tried to have lunch in the Marco Polo Restaurant, opposite the Afrosiab Palace Hotel, but it was closed.

Samarkand did not shy from offering Russian dishes over any of the Uzbek traditional fares, which were kept low profile and served at the save havens of family houses. Rather than in the public restaurants. That was my impression.

Samarkand was a lovely city, but its monuments felt much less intimate than those in Bukhara and much much less than in Khiva. They were grand and wonderful, but the modern city invaded them too aggressively. Also, the sights were spread out considerably one from another, well at least in comparison with the other two magic places. At least it did stimulate imagination how grand and lovely and important Samarkand must have been in the past, given the distances between the sights that remain. It must have been really a big city, rivalling easily any other capital in the region. While Khiva and Bukhara carried an exceptional dose of mystery, warmth and amity, Samarkand gave an impression of flamboyance and scale.

If I were to make the trip again, or recommend to someone, I would have done it in the opposite direction. I would have started with Tashkent obviously, then proceeded to Samarkand and Shakhriyabz, and then Bukhara and finally Khiva. Actually, the last two would not need to be reversed. But in this sequence, one would start with the largest city and ended in the smallest, with the exception of the side trip from Samarkand to Shakhriyabz. Yet, since Bukhara carried the largest measure of mystique, I might actually keep it to the very last stop, to top the experience.



Shakhrisabz

About an hour drive from Samarkand, over the mountains, there is a small town, which UNESCO also listed as a World Heritage Site. It was Tamerlane's hometown, where virtually everything is related to his name, in one way or another, as someone said. His father Emir Taragay and spiritual teacher, Shamseddin Kulol, as well as his elder sons Djakhangir and Omar Sheikh had been buried here.

Taxi ride from Samarkand, return was \$55, incl. waiting time. Not a bad value at all, given the distance and the climb up the mountains.

In the town, the remains of the once grand Ak-Saray Palace include the largest in Central Asia arch. It had collapsed 200 years ago but the large portions of the two pylons still standing were truly amazing. It was possible to climb one of them when I visited. Also, on that day, 08-08-08, it seemed that millions and millions of couples decided to get married, despite being probably too young,

and congregated at the large statue of Emir Timur, near the arch. They had their photographs taken there and young guys were playing traditional music on drums and huge brass (?) trumpets. Is number 8 lucky?

I also liked the two mosques in the south of the town, the Kok-Gumbaz and its two mausolea - Shamseddin Kulol and Gumbazi Seyidan, with a large emerald dome each, and Khazratu Imam Mosque. The complex of the latter included the crypt of Timur and the tomb of Djakhangir. However the former was more elaborately decorated. Well, there the decorations remained to this day, to be exact.

UNESCO inscription carries the following justification of the inclusion on the list: "The historic centre of Shakhrisabz contains a collection of exceptional monuments and ancient quarters which bear witness to the city's secular development, and particularly to the period of its apogee, under the rule of Amir Timur and the Timurids, in the 15th-16th century. Shakhrisabz contains many fine monuments, and in particular those from the Timurid period, which was of great cultural and political significance in

medieval Central Asia. The buildings of Shakhrisabz, notably the Ak-Sarai Palace and the Tomb of Timur, are outstanding examples of a style which had a profound influence on the architecture of this region."

There was not that much to do and see in the town. The sights were small and close one to another. When I arrived, it was so hot that drinking bottles or coca-cola was the only method to keep hydrated and maintain sufficient level of sugar and alertness in your body.

I stepped into a small museum for a change, and I quickly regretted it. Almost as if I forgot that I was not a museum person. I do not know what I was thinking! It was poor equipped and the exhibitions were still in the making. They did not teach me anything new. I am sorry to say, but I felt like I only wasted money and time. The museum was located opposite the park with the Timur's statue.

From Shakhrisabz I went back to Samarkand to catch my train to the capital and then continue to Kazakhstan the next day.



At first...

Those, who saw 'Borat...' film by Sasha Baron Cohen, were laughing to tears, suspecting that whatever was being shown as Kazakh way of life was a complete distortion of truth. However, not all was a complete lie. Many elements of life in Kazakhstan, although massively exaggerate in the film, were in fact true. I was terribly shocked to find out, actually.

But let me tell how I found myself crossing the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

To cross over to Shymkent in Kazakhstan by road from Tashkent, just 120 km away, it took me 12 hours, 8 of which I spent on the border. It was a total nightmare of the worst kind. I have lost count how many times I thought to myself that I should have flown instead. And I was lucky, actually.

First, the taxi from the hotel in Tashkent took me to the secondary border crossing as the main one was closed for renovation for an unforeseeable future. He said I should be fine, charged me 12,000 sums (\$9) but I could not cross there. It was, what I call, a discriminatory border point, i.e. only for the Kazakhs or Uzbeks. I tried muscle my way through repeatedly stating the main crossing was closed and I did not know what to do. The crossing was in the middle of nowhere. It was located in some border village, and there were no transport facilities there at all. I had no chance of catching a taxi to go back to Tashkent to re-configure my route somehow. My adrenaline started to kick in and my blood neared a boiling point.

My luck did not abandon me, however (I wish I was so lucky playing Lotto). An Uzbek lady, who was travelling with her Turkish husband and children overheard my argument with the border officer and offered me the ride to the other crossing point, they also were turned away, as they did not let

any vehicle pass and her husband had Turkish passport, obviously.

She was going for a wedding of her sister in Shymkent with her aunt and three of her five children. The boys, Ahmed, 6, and Rajab, 9, were really mischievous. I loved them and they quickly became fond of me, too. Ahmed had the best worst ideas and you could see the mischief in his deep brown eyes. His dimples were often giving away the moment something naughty and rather amusing was going to happen.

The family offered me the ride all the way to Shymkent, which really indeed work for me. I thought, Ahmed, who really like me (I've always had this quality with children) was giving me shoulder massage as he was sitting behind me in this 8-seater Kia.

Things stopped going my way when, after visiting three other crossings and being turned away, we eventually stopped in the queue at the Yallama/Konysbayeva point.

The Uzbek side, I thought was going really really slow. Our car was fifth in the line and it took three hours to cross to the no-man land.

I actually crossed first on foot, after several speculations whether that would make more sense for me. The ladies said that I could simply wait for them at the other side and could influence the officers to speed up the process a little if they told them I was waiting. I foolishly left all my luggage apart from my camera at the car and crossed. For me the process was very simple. A few silly questions asked and I was through.

Then I waited the three hours at the no-man land as they would not let me wait for the car as soon as I cleared immigration and customs (!) because my bags were still uncleared. I was hoping that the family did not think I did it in purpose to smuggle something, but this might have given such an impression.

Then, when they joined me, we drove those 800 yards across the border line to be stopped before the Kazakh line. The driver

had to bribe the Kazakh officer only to leave the no-man land area! I thought of Borat at that moment.

Then, I cleared all the formalities relatively painlessly, despite the glacial pace of the queue and old Kazakh grandmas jumping it in the front of me all the time! We, the British are almost religious about queuing.

I was happy with the procedures myself, yet, the car was going to take five more hours! The only reason for that was that the driver was not keen to give more bribes to anyone anymore. The entire family crossed on foot and we had to wait for the father with the car. Those Kazakh demons could not care less if the little boys and their three year old cousin were getting hungry and worried about their dad and uncle. Although all papers were fine (they crossed the border several times a year) the evil Borats demanded a bribe of \$50.

The final immigration officer also requested a 'souvenir' from me in the form of dollars with smug grin. I categorically refused as said that he was living in a fantasy world. I

did not even carry dollars with me and in the 21st century people travelled with credit cards and not cash!

However, at the border, and earlier in Bukhara in Uzbekistan, I met participants of the Mongol Rally - London/Madrid to Ulaanbator, who told me some nasty stories. At the border, I met the Dutch team. They had to pay \$400 to 'clear' customs, although it was obvious they were part of the international rally, and there was nothing exceptional they had to carry with them, which was not related to the event. Yet, I can understand that the magnitude of the baggage attracted such a high 'fee'.

It was so funny how the two mischiefs managed to fill the waiting time with so many attractions and pranks that made half of the border trading stalls rolling in laughter. They were riding a wheelbarrow, kept lifting vehicles in the car park, and mixing various soft drinks to a point of indrinkability.

Anyway, I was dissatisfied with all that delay, yet had I decided to cross on my own and





then picked up a different car at the other side to continue solo, I would have:

- got to Shymkent/Turkistan much faster;
- had to pay for a taxi/bus (\$60/\$110);
- not experienced staying at a Kazakh house, crashing on a verandah;
- had to find a hotel in Shymkent/Turkistan late at night (\$40)
- not enjoyed drinking tea and vodka with a lovely Kazakh/Uzbek family
- not seen little Ahmed cry that I left, with his tiny arms stretched out of the car window...

I was in fact invited to the wedding but I could not attend. I was leaving the next morning to Almaty. I am sure it would have been a great experience, but since I did not have a gift it would also be a little awkward, I think.

Staying at the Kazakh house in the country's second largest city was eye opening and only proved that what Sasha Baron Cohen showed in his film about Borat was actually true, although I really did not want to believe it at all. The reality was however brutal, if that is the right word here.

Well, here it goes. There were no bathrooms in the house. And it was a large, modern, recently constructed, comfortable house with many rooms! Instead, washing was done in the central open-air courtyard from a hose and toilet was just a hole in the ground at the back end of the garden. I really did not expect that at all. Later, in Almaty, I found what the explanation might have been.

As soon as we arrived, which was about 1 o'clock in the morning (in the night, obviously), the table in the sitting room was quickly filled with food and ... vodka.

The family insisted we all eat something and empty at least two bottles of the fire water. I was not very keen on getting drunk on vodka, but hey - that was the Kazakh way. And it was a good reason to celebrate that we eventually made it across the border and to Shymkent!

Kazakhstan showed also its nasty face. It was horrifically overpriced, and the lack of bathrooms, even at the hotels was getting to me. It also seemed like a police state with little freedom to enjoy life and the outdoors. And the outdoors were truly spectacular!

turkestan

Turkistan on UNESCO's World Heritage List was the main reason why I decided to go to Kazakhstan. When I got there, I was truly impressed. The size of the mausoleum was immense, easily rivalling Egyptian temples!

This was really the only reason why I decided to go to Kazakhstan. But I had to come to Shymkent first, obviously, from where I took a taxi to Turkestan.

The taxi driver drove like crazy. I was so glad the safety belt worked. He was making about 140 km/h (90 mph) on a single lane road, overtaking in a heart-stopping last second. This way, the distance of about 160 km he made in about 1h15'. I don't want say how many times he had to abandon the overtaking due to a vehicle approaching fast from the opposite direction! And I did that twice, plus I had to pay him. At least it was a good value - KZT 10,000 (\$85).

There was a large public coach running between Shymkent and Turkistan but it was

sporadic and often overbooked, leaving people having to use shared taxis like me. Obviously they were paying less than me since I was an Englishman (alien) in Shymkent.

This is what UNESCO said about the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi when listing it as a World Heritage Site in 2003: "The Mausoleum (...) is an outstanding achievement in the Timurid architecture, and it has significantly contributed to the development of Islamic religious architecture. The mausoleum and its site represent an exceptional testimony to the culture of the Central Asian region, and to the development of building technology. It was a prototype for the development of a major building type in the Timurid period, becoming a significant reference in the history of Timurid architecture."

The mausoleum exceeded my expectations by far. First of all, I didn't expect it to be this massive. The front of the structure, which resembled a fusion between a Mogul and Sahel architectural styles, was so huge that it rivalled many temples, the largest of

which I saw in Egypt and South-East Asia. It was remarkably free from colourful decorations revealing the earth-colour brickwork, and the wooden logs sticking out. Then, the domes were classical mosque. Emerald, with stalactite style decorative motif at the lower rim of the dome, and the cream or coffee-&-cream colour neck with Quran (Koran) calligraphy decorations below. The second, lower dome, had the ice-cream style Samarkand effect, decorated with colourful tiles.

Astonishingly, the back door to the main building was where the majority of elaborate decorations could be found. The small portal was glittering with multiple colours of the meticulously laid out ceramic tiles. In addition, all sides (except the front of course) were tiled over creating colourful patterns. That was something unusual as the majority of the Islamic buildings I knew of had only the main iwans decorated and the back and sides were usually undecorated.

The memorial was built at the time of Timur (Tamerlane), from 1389 to 1405. The construction was aborted and the

mausoleum had been left partly unfinished. The Persian architects experimented with various and rather pioneering architectural and structural solutions later used in the construction of Samarkand, the capital of the Timurid Empire at that time. The mausoleum remains one of the largest and best-preserved constructions of the Timurid period. It is truly gigantic. There are no words to describe it adequately. There is no structure like it anywhere else in the world. And inside, it surprisingly feels small and almost cozy. This is because there are several rooms inside. There are two places of worship (there are likely to be mosques, but I do not want to speculate) and a few rooms with remains of very important people, and even rooms-cum-museums with antique furniture.

The park surrounding the complex, planted mainly with roses made a superb impression. It was excellently managed and the rose bushes looked impressive. Red colour flowers dominated. On the approach to the main site, there was a pedestrianised alley with benches under small trees. At one of the sides, a number of small businesses



opened, including shops, cafe, photographic shop, etc. It was very convenient and the lack of traffic made the spot really pleasant, apart from a few beggars specifically targeting foreigners. If you gave them too little money, they would toss it on the pavement! I could not believe my own eyes when I saw that. Not a pleasant episode in this otherwise utterly magical and unrivalled place. Luckily it was enough to look the other way to quickly recover from the displeasing situation.

Apart from the obvious UNESCO listed site, there were a couple of baths near it, which received a fair number of visitors, who trickled in and out in streams of single lines of people. Interestingly, the sites of the baths offered rather good views of the entire complex, except the walls, which meant excellent spots for taking photographs.

Beside of that, there was little to see in Turkistan. I saw a few intriguingly looking mosques and churches, architecture of which indicated that they might have been erected fairly recently.

The walls near the main mosque looked really solid. Perhaps in the past, the wall

surrounded the entire complex. When I visited, a part of it (fair length actually) was in a very good condition. It had a nice gate, through which a path led directly to the entrance of the main mausoleum. Steps led onto the walls, from which one had a nice view or could take decent photos. This was one of the favourite spots the local visitors (I was the only foreign tourist around that day) who strolled along the walls in pairs admiring the site and killing time, I guess.

A little cafe right by the walls, probably in the spot where the wall would continue if surrounded the mausoleum completely, had several tables at their shaded terrace. Regular fare of teas, coffees and sodas were served, plus some sweets. The view of the rose gardens and the mausoleum's huge portal was splendid, if a bit surreal and unearthly.

There was at least one decent hotel in Turkistan, Hotel Edem charging \$45 per night. I planned to accommodate myself there for one night, but eventually did not end up staying there at all due to the delays at the Uzbek/Kazakh border and the trip to Shymkent. Instead I stayed two nights in Shymkent.

shymkent

Ordabasy Hotel (Гостиница Ордабасы) was located across the roundabout where the old mosque with gold dome stood, next to the monument of the old Mig Soviet aircraft fighter. My single room (#303, \$40, incl. breakfast) was light, had balcony overlooking the mosque and the aircraft, double size bed and sat TV with Russian-dubbed channels plus CNN. Bathroom was however a little horrifying. The bath tube was old and really dirty. Toilet bowl was European style but wobbly and cried for some heavy-duty bleach. At least the air-con worked well and the bed sheets were clean. I did not spot any bugs anywhere either. The hotel was well located and the receptionist was very helpful. It was her to tell me about buses to the airport, etc.

As for nightlife, Shymkent was a much larger city and a better place to go out than Turkestan, but even there venues were not that obvious. In the park by the cinema, there were a few cafes, which sometimes put a loud music on or even a live band. The quality of the bands was... to put it lightly





from questionable to very bad. If the singers were no miming, then the live singing was excruciating. Sometimes it was of an average karaoke quality, but my problem was that the bands seemed to hate their act. There was no enthusiasm in their singing and playing at all. Almost as if they were forced to do it. Anyway, there was no shortage of drinks, which normally contributes to a better appreciation of the nightlife. Even if the drinks contained only fruit juice or a combination of spices from around the world, caramel and water.

I was wondering what typical Kazakh I could have for dinner, other than the dishes served by the family the night before.

I found the Tomoris (Томирис) restaurant located in a small park near the Town Hall and next to the Shymkent Cinema, which had a menu of relatively expensive dishes. Their tented area in the park, with lacquered brown wooden tables with benches, popular with beer drinkers played loud Russian semi-contemporary music mixed with new-ish pop hits from the US and UK until a live band started playing Russian, what I call politely call 'easy listening'. Or should I have said an attractive but mediocre vocalist singing to a

computer-generated music, exclusively in Russian.

I had a beer there and pielmieni (\$2.50), which were really nice, if a bit oversalted, but with plenty of chives and dill. The restaurant charged 15% service charge automatically.

Along many streets small restaurants served simple foods, mainly shashliks, of varied quality. Prices ranged from 90 KZT to 250 KZT, depending on the type of shashliks and restaurant. Many places were completely empty, clearly indicating the quality of their shashliks.

In the morning, I was leaving for Almaty. The receptionist in my hotel was kind enough to tell me not to take a taxi to the airport, as buses 12 and 126 took 20 only minutes from the centre to the airport and charged 40 tenge (\$0.33). Tickets were bought on board.

The airport was very chaotic. Although a small electronic information table was on, it did not show any flights at all. Hardly audible announcements were made in Russian and only occasionally in Kazakh, too.

The inconspicuous check-in desks looking like kiosk windows did not have destinations displayed. It was impossible to know what flight was registering where or at which desk. This was an exceptionally poor standard for an international airport.

Almaty

My Air Astana plane was over an hour late! Instead of 10:55am I landed at 12:35pm. The airline was really good, though. The hot sandwich was rather edible.

The taxi drivers at the airport were probably the lowest form of life that somehow shifted its shape to become the greediest taxi drivers on this planet. They attacked me as soon as I left the baggage reclaim. I ignored them, although they kept insisting like leeches. I eventually went upstairs to the departure hall, changed my remaining rubles and enquired at the Information desk about the taxi fares. She knew nothing. It should be called the Lack of Information Desk. But a lady selling some kind of loyalty cards to Kazakh citizens told me that I should not pay

more than 500 tenge to the Green Market. The evil taxi drivers wanted six times more!! I laughed at them and called them cheaters. I explained that they were responsible for the awful first impression of Kazakhstan that visitors got, and asked how they could sleep at night.

It is slowly on the rise. Almaty has been desperately trying not to fade completely since it has been stripped from its capital status. It doesn't have major sights but its building modern financial centre. Its major quality is, however the mountains.

It looked almost very pleasant but I could not find anything of interest in Almaty, or even a decent pizza restaurant. I eventually sat down at a semi-previsionary restaurant Demalys (Демалыс) serving set lunches for 550 tenge + 10% service charge. The set included cold national soup, cucumber and tomato salad, baked chicken roll with rice and tea. Everything was good, yet, except soup, the portions were tiny.

The wooden church in the park made a great impression among the rather uninspiring drab and grey buildings of the

centre. First of all, the city itself was not very old. It was founded in the late 19th century, only to be in 75% destroyed by the earthquake of 1911. But the church survived. Its several domes and roofs were colourfully decorated by square and diamond size wooden panels painted in various shades. It contrasted dramatically against the greenery of the park, the second largest one in Almaty. The groups of roses planted around the church composed a pretty sight. Having survived not only the earthquake, the Soviet Revolution, the WWII, and the test of time, the building had become a true gem.

The church was surrounded by roses, which shined mainly with various shades of red and ... red. The very pleasant park was vast and it was really well kept. It had narrow , paved alleys to walk around or rollerskate, and a few clean and comfortable benches to catch a breath.

The greenery everywhere and the parks, makes the city harder to navigate than on average. Also, the lack of distinctive landmarks in the centre, and trees planted along both sides of the streets hiding the buildings, made the avenues and alleys look alike. That is what I liked. It felt like I was walking in a grand park with no end. On a sunny weather, the great mountains in the SSE gave away my position, but on a cloudy day (the afternoon of my second day), they disappeared, taking away my only orientation point. It was like being on discovery all the time, and I as tried several different way to get where I wanted to get, or come back...

I checked into the Turkistan Hotel as recommended by a couple of Swiss travellers I met in Samarkand (Uzbekistan). My single room without air-con or shower but with large windows and ensuite toilet bowl and washing basin was 4,500 tenges (\$37.50). Payment had to be done in advance, so I only paid the first night. I really wasn't sure how long I wanted to stay in the former capital. I had not heard about any specific sights in the city. But I did know about the mountains looming in the background and the lakes there.

I originally wanted to stay at Allya Hotel (\$40) but could not locate it and the Turkistan Hotel was supposed to be in the centre. It was indeed.

From the Green Bazaar in the westerly direction there was a Silk Way Shopping Centre and a pedestrianised alley, part of Zhibek Zholy street (ул. Жибек Жолы) lined up with little open-air cafes and restaurants and several shopping centres absolutely all of which, with no exception, specialised in mobile phones. It also seemed to me that each type of handset had its own dedicated



salesperson. I could swear there were more salespeople than customers.

It surely looked like the Almatans liked shooting pool. I spotted many billiard saloons around the city. Basically, they were bars with pool tables. Some played loud music like the Loud Billiard saloon just before the Silk Way shopping mall. Music from this venue was heard already one and a half blocks away.

Looking for some action, I popped into the Georgian cafe Keruen in the pedestrianised zone to tribute the Georgian civilians bombed by Russia at the time as I was holidaying in Central Asia and Olympic Games were going on in China. For the duration of Olympic games all wars were suspended, that was the whole purpose of having the games! The cafe was not cheap and it was popular. It served promising food, too. The KZT 900 - 1,300 fish shashliks looked really yummy. The place was perfect for people watching. They had three types of wheat hefe-weizen beer, and tables out in the pavement.

I sat down at the cafe-cum-restaurant Bambolo (Бамболо), which had 11 types of draft beer, including Hoegaarden (970 KZT 0.5l). It was located at the pedestrianised alley, opposite a large German restaurant called Tirol. Its menu was comprehensive but the dishes were not cheap. An average main dish without sides was about KZT 1,000 while steaks cost KZT 1,300 - 1,900. The quality of the place was demonstrated by the number of customers and the expensiveness by the number of those leaving having just looked at the menu. I just ordered my Hoegaarden but peeked over others' shoulders and the dishes were large and looked delicious. Waiters picked up mainly very empty plates afterwards.

And then, a miracle happened. I saw someone eating pizza! I could not believe I missed that on the menu. I asked my waiter Andrey if I could pay by credit card and when he said yes, I ordered an Italian style (as opposed to the Pizza Hut style also available) Formula-1 for KZT 850 (\$7). For some strange reason I had been craving for a pizza for a few days. Well how long can a food loving man survive on pielmieni and shashliks? ;) Oh, the restaurant offered blankets to customers in the evening, when it was getting a bit chilly. During the day, industrial rotating fans with micro sprays operated continuously every third table. Very pleasant!

They automatically added 10% for service, yet at the bottom of the bill they stated that 'rewarding of the waiter is welcome but under your discretion', which is obviously very cheeky.



Almaty was also well catered by doner kebab booths, which often had more than one type of meat, usually lamb (doner) and chicken. They usually asked about KZT 300.

Well, in Almaty, there was virtually nothing to admire, apart from one or two old buildings from the late 19th century and I guess the new flamboyant structures erected when Almaty was the capital for the most of the 20th century. So, I fished out a travel

office in one of the 5* hotels (normally not recommended) and paid for a trip to the Big Almaty Lake in the mountains. It cost me dear (\$260) but I did not expect a taxi to cost much less, plus the road climbing the mountains was in a very bad condition. I could see that regular 2WD cars struggled, and on wet weather would not make it. The lake was not that great, but the snow-capped mountains were spectacular. On the way, many yurt-based cafes operated



serving fermented horse and camel milk, and also fresh one, too. Tea was a standard drink there. Many local families came to the Big Almaty River Gorge for camping and splashing in the ice-cold river. In the summer the river was just a stream, but the huge devastation from the spring could be clearly seen, when the stream had turned into mudflow leaving huge rocks on the way.

The trip from Almaty to the Big Almaty Lake took about 2 hours, although it was only about 26 kilometres. Along the way from upper Almaty, where new financial district was being built and groups of modern apartment blocks, fine villas and boutique hotels sprung up in the last several years. Some looked like palaces. Apparently, the government let people build anything they wanted and as dangerously close to the river as practically possible. So they did.

Upper in the mountains, on the territory of the national park (\$10 entry fee) construction was not allowed but people were free to erect yurts. This way, nice little hotels, cafes, and restaurants all based on yurts dotted the valley of the river up to the elevation of approximately 2,300 meters

above the sea. The Big Almaty Lake was at 2,511 meters. Trees were disappearing from 2,700 meters and the snow never melted from altitudes higher than 3,700 meters. The mountains really looked great and the real yurts in the foreground appeared like white snow caps. I approach one and was invited to have a look inside. There was plenty of room there for a fair size table, a couple of two-seater sofas, and a double bed. Natural light came inside through a small opening as the very tip of the yurt was slightly elevated to allow for air circulation. The real traditional yurts in Kazakhstan were made from wood (the arched grid) and felt (all the rest) and finally covered by woollen sheet, often decorated with single colour patterns. The only entrance was made from wood. Although I noticed that the new yurts sported also metal doors.

The Big Almaty River Gorge was gorgeous. The mountains at both sides of the river rose gradually. First they were covered by green forest and shrubs. Then, the forest became thinner and the raspberries bushes seemed to dominate in on the slopes. Then, even them disappeared giving way to some small shrubs, grasses, and I guess lichen. Above

that bare rocks made the hills grey. Snow remained only on the highest mountains. Of which two were visible at the lake.

I kept photographing the mountains when a soldier approached me and demanded seeing my documents. He wasn't friendly, so I refused to speak Russian. I told him that my documents were in a car some several hundred yards down, pointing at the VW down the river. I thought he let go but later he followed me to speak to my driver. He was just trying to be difficult claiming that this was a border zone and all had to carry identification. He thought I had none but then I pulled out my passport from my camera bag and his face changed. He saluted out and went away. But before he explained that the night before they captured 25 people crossing illegally from Kyrgyzstan some 95 kilometres away. This area was prone for drug trafficking.

Well, after coming back from the Big Almaty Lake, I just chilled in the centre. If civilisation was measured by the number of ATMs and the availability of draft hefe-weizen or white wheat beer, Almaty would top the list. Cash machines of different

shapes and sizes working with any cards issued anywhere in the world could be found virtually every few yards. The cafes offered often not just one white beer from tap but two or three, like the Paulaner, Franziskaner, Blanche de Bruxelles or Hoegaarden.

If one stays in Kazakhstan longer than 5 full days, a registration at the Immigration Police is required. Certain hotels do it, but not all and if asked, they'd charge even KZT 5,000. Independently, one can register directly in Almaty for KZT 745 at the office on Tole Bi Kosmonavtov Street. The officer's name is Konstantin Dostavalov.

I had a strong feeling that I overstayed in Kazakhstan. I do not want to say that it disappointed me somehow, but I guess I did not go to the right places, with the exception of Turkestan obviously. I really should have just gone to Turkestan and then some a national park and experience more of the nature, which Kazakhstan has with so plentiful and to the world's highest quality. So, I might have made a mistake. Surely, it was interesting the peculiar urban life of the

Kazakhs, however I was hoping for more quality time, and for much better price. Much better price, indeed!

The fact that I planned three days in Almaty might have been the reason for this all. There was really so little to see and do in the former capital, that I quickly got bored. When I was reading about Almaty in the guidebooks and viewed its satellite picture, it looked so promising; green and so close to the giant mountains. I was hoping it would keep me occupied for a few days, particularly with regard to its surroundings. In the end, I could only go to see the Big Almaty Lake, and nothing more, which might have spoiled my view on Kazakhstan.

The other aspect were the people. Apart from that friendly family, who gave me the lift and put me up for the first night, I was under the impression that the Kazakhs were not the friendliest people on the planet. I am probably judging them based on my interaction with taxi drivers (I do try to avoid that), but the Uzbek chauffeurs in comparison were relatively honest and friendly.

I did try to interact with hotel, bar and restaurant staff in Shymkent and Almaty, but they were so stiff and cold, almost as my presence was actually a problem for them. So unwelcoming, I thought.

I am not writing Kazakhstan off completely, no. But it will definitely be on the bottom of the list of places I would ever consider visiting again. It is a vast country, and there are most certainly spots so beautiful that not seeing them would be a murder. I will take my time, though. Amanda and Olivier had much better experiences in Kazakhstan and with the Kazakhs, in more rural areas, that I will seek their advice, if I ever plan my next trip there.

Private minibuses from Almaty to Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan were leaving from the suburban terminal Sayran (Сайран Автовокзал, tel 2762644). Prices were negotiable with the minibus and taxi drivers. Tram #4 (KZT 50) from the centre to Sayran would have taken 40 minutes, if it was still running there. Taxi set me back KZT 1,000, as much as the minibus to Kyrgyz capital. This is what I mean! Yeah, never mind.





Originally...

I almost crossed to Kyrgyzstan on the first attempt. But few weeks back, the regulations have changed and by the time I reached the border, Polish citizens acquired the requirement for a visa. Normally one is available on arrival but not at that crossing I chose. I knew I should have flown again, and after the experience on the previous border I did check availability of flights, but there was no air connection between Almaty and Bishkek. Had I flown, I would have been in Kyrgyzstan within minutes, but I had to go back to Almaty and apply for the Kyrgyz visa. Travelling 200 km back and forward with absolutely no result is not the optimal way to travel, is it?

I was really unhappy, as I did check visa requirements some time before I left, which clearly stated that Poles did not need a visa. The officials at the border were cheeky

saying that I was not the only one as travellers en route would not know about the change. They were really inflexible and thoroughly enjoyed sending travellers back with a smirk on their faces.

But the problem was I no longer had a visa for Kazakhstan, as it was cancelled when I left the country some minutes previously. I felt stuck at the no-man's land. Fortunately, the chief immigration officer at the Kazakh post was pragmatic and understanding. The first and the last such a good 'state' Kazakh I met on this trip. He made annotations in my passport and encouraged me to get a Kyrgyz visa within 24 hours, as he would then let me through without any problems. I was not entirely comfortable with his 'anulirovano' stamp on my visa to indicate that my exit stamp was annulled rather than the entire visa. It looked terribly odd, but I was hopeful that it was not going to be issue. I needed to focus of getting the Kyrgyz visa pronto.

Then I almost freaked out when I checked in the phonebook that there was no diplomatic

representation of Kyrgyz Republic in Almaty and I would need to go all the way to Astana, almost 2 hours away by air! But I enquired at the hotel and there was a General Consulate in Almaty, which dealt with visas. I made plans to go there in the morning and beg for issuing me a visa the same day. I was getting really bored in Almaty, which was draining my budget!

I had to make a plea at the consulate to get a visa issued on the same day. One of the clerks was really strict and she refused to listen to my arguments about the changes to the regulations recently and my will to see something in Kyrgyzstan before my flight back home. She did inspect my flight ticket but was claiming that she could only issue me a visa valid from the 16th August - a day before my departure!

But I made a technical move. I completed my application and attempting to attach my photo, I asked the other clerk how much I should pay for the visa and where the bank to make this payment (no cash was officially

allowed to be handed to anyone in the consulate) was. She took my application, attached the photo and noticed that I put the day of entry to Kyrgyzstan - 14 August, which was 'tomorrow'. She immediately understood that I was in a hurry and said - "if you want visa right away, you pay me now \$100 and come back at 4pm". With some stroke of luck, I had exactly 5 x \$20 in my passport. I handed it immediately and disappeared as quickly as I could.

I came back at 3:55pm and got my visa. I ejected myself from the building, got a taxi to the bus terminal and hired a shared taxi all the way to Bishkek.

On the way, there was another 'surprise' waiting for me. A roadblock! The policeman demanded to see my passport, and examined my peculiar annotations on the visa. He claimed that my entire visa was void and that I therefore was in the country illegally. My tongue twisted with the most complicated Russian words I could think of and, with noticeable irritation in my voice I kept explaining the situation.

His tiny brain could not comprehend that only an exit stamp could be annulled. Or at

least that was the impression he was making. I knew exactly what his strategy was. He wanted a bribe. Even the taxi driver thought that this was what I needed to do. But I stood firm and told him that I was just going to call the border post to confirm that he was an idiot. I ordered my body language to send signals to him that there was no way I was going to give him any money!

He let me go within 15 minutes, and I was back on the road.

At the border, my friendly chief immigration officer was not there. But I managed to blag my way through all the other officers, and I crossed smoothly. My two passports must have been remembered by the entire post from the day before!

Bishkek

Although Kyrgyzstan is very Asian, its capital looks very Soviet-like. Its most prominent structures follow a social-realism style in architecture, mocking the Neoclassicism like most of the large town in the former Soviet Union. Bishkek is green though.

I had high expectations from Kyrgyzstan and Bishkek. I heard great stories about the country landscape and the hospitality of people.

As I arrived in Bishkek after a few hick-ups., I reached the Kyrgyz capital city about an hour after sunset, one day later than planned! It was not ideal. I had little time to find a hotel. I did not have any Kyrgyz soms (local currency), I had not eaten all day, and I really could use a drink, too.

First hour in the city was very hectic. I switched my discovery mode to find a money exchanger, who would accept euros or pound sterling. Eventually, I risked jumping into a taxi with an empty wallet. But the driver found an obscure bureau de change, I changed some cash in a hole in a wall from a couple of naked men (very strange I know, but it was indeed late), and could relax a little.

On the way in to the city, I spotted a very nice little church. It was nicely lit at night, and I so wanted to come back there to take some pictures, but I had no idea what its name was and the cab driver drove like crazy. There was no way for me to find out.





I could not even describe where it was. It was a lost sight for me. So, I went back to the hotel, ordered a drink at the cafe downstairs and a night snack. I left sightseeing until I was going to be back in the city a couple days later.

A little square in the centre with the National Philharmonic in the centre, a university building on one side and ministry of something on the other. The modernist-ish architecture of the philharmonic contrasted dramatically with the neo-classical facades of the university and the ministry. The front of the theatre and the ministry sported elaborate plant and flower compositions. Such attention to floral decoration of municipal squares is decreasingly common, from my experience.

I spotted the square on the first night I arrived at the Kyrgyz capital when looking for an ATM. I so wanted to come back here to have a look at it properly. On my last day, my taxi dropped me off at the main (and huge) square of Bishkek, where a Russian pop group, Eros, was going to give a concert that night. I therefore wanted to avoid the fast increasing crowd and walked off in one

of the four possible directions without knowing where I was going to end up. And how lucky was I to find the square I wanted to see from the other night!

What was really great about Bishkek? Prices! After a few crazy days in the overpriced Kazakhstan I welcomed the more reasonable prices in Bishkek. A pint of beer was just under €1 (50 soms but it was easy to find it for 45 soms or less) and a full blown, three course dinner at a mid range restaurant was about \$6 (200 soms), excluding drinks. Compared with Kazakhstan, which was almost ten times more expensive, at least for drinks, it felt like a great relief to the backpocket.

Kyrgyz capital was nicely green. Countless large leafy trees ran along the streets and pavements creating an atmosphere of walking in a park.

It was safe. Drivers often left their cars unlocked with windows down when drinking tea in a nearby cafe. That was so refreshing! I have not been able to do that for ages in many countries, unless I was alone in a desert and there was only one cafe!

Bishkek is often referred as just a large town, which made it as a capital of an independent country emerging out of the fall of the Soviet Union. When I visited, it seemed to have been stripped off historical buildings completely. The city centre was full of large socialist structures, which rather than to impress, were made to intimidate.

So, Bishkek could not be called cozy. Its open spaces, wide avenues and squares would contribute to a description of 'modern'. Such a pity that nothing remains from the times, when Bishkek sat on one of the branches of the Great Silk Road. And yet for those interested in architecture and urban planning of the 20th century should find the Kyrgyz capital rather fascinating. Particularly around the Ala Too Square, Chui Avenue, and Yusup Abdrakhmanov Street.

I stayed at the Hotel Kazakhstan (KGS 1,200; \$35) right by the bus terminal, which was not my first choice but I liked it a lot. Its location was great for my purposes, and its adjacent cafe of the same name played hysterical live music. The triple room I stayed at was branded semi-lux. It was a good size, mega clean, the bathroom was

lovely and spotless and the air-con worked quietly.

The staff knew little about anything to do with travelling, despite being so close to the bus terminal, but was helpful and friendly. Including the security personnel, who kindly offered their escort to the terminal at the night when I arrived and needed to change money there.

I wanted to stay at a hostel or some kind of backpackers place but it was late when I arrived and the taxi driver did not know about anything like that. But it would have been good for me to enquire about some 'magic' places that I should not miss in the country, which I could make with the fellow travellers. In the end, I was relatively happy with the Kazakhstan Hotel, despite the fact that I really wanted to just forget about Kazakhstan! At least at that point in time.

Bishkek had plenty of parks scattered around the centre. Some of them were very pleasant. The giant leafy trees, which must turn in the autumn created great calm ambiance right in the heart of the

metropolis. Locals seemed to like those spots as many hang there, gossiped on the benches, ate ice-cream widely available from fixed or mobile stands.

If someone preferred hanging in cafes, there were plenty of them, too. I sat at one of them near the National Kyrgyz Philharmonic. It served traditional tea (black and green) always from the ceramic pots, as well as coffees and a range of Kyrgyz, Central Asian and European dishes. Manty seemed to be very popular with the Kyrgyz, who normally ordered five or six large ones with meat, as they were always priced by piece. I liked that the locals took time having their meal while discussing current affairs.

Somehow it was the casinos that dominated Bishkek's nightlife. The Mongol Casino was new and kept advertising heavily. Others were Essey, Vegas, Rio, and Eldorado. I am not a casino person, so I did not check any of them.

I preferred local cafes, which often stayed open until wee hours of the morning and played live music. The Kazakhstan Cafe, next

to my hotel was so convenient that I did not have to venture very far. It was popular, served good beer, excellent food, the personnel was very friendly and the live music was not necessarily psychedelic, but so amateurish that it made me laugh so much. The locals loved it so much, though. The cafe was often packed and the band must have felt encouraged to try harder and harder. The harder they tried, the funnier it was. It was pretentious and unnatural. Perhaps it was meant to be like that. I do not know.

Cafe Kazakhstan had a comprehensive menu, including a number of reasonably priced Chinese dishes. Their almost decent draft beer was KGS 55.

Bishkek, for a capital of a country, had many restaurants, as expected. Many Chinese restaurants seemed to dominated Chui street, for some reason. I have not eaten at any, as I dined and lunched outside the capital, with the exception to the Kazakhstan Cafe, where I tried their Chinese Chicken. It was fantastic. It came on a hot sizzling plate with plenty of peppers, garlic, onions, green





beans and this wonderful sauce. Had the chicken been boneless, it would have been truly perfect!

Bishkek's Manas International Airport (FRU) is about 60km out of town. Since most international flights usually leave at very unsociable hours, the only sensible way to get there was by taxi. It cost me about 420 soms (\$12) in the middle of the night or 4 o'clock in the morning. The airport was equipped with old instruments, which were insufficient to lead aircraft towards the runway in poor weather conditions. This means often delays. And a few air catastrophes. About two days after, I left the country, an aircraft crashed at the airport. Not a happy thought, by any means.

Taxis in Bishkek were cheaper when pre-ordered by telephone I found. There was a myriad of private, unassociated taxis everywhere, too but they would always try to take an advantage of a foreign visitor, and the taxis ordered by phone run fixed tariffs, which could be verified by the operator, who would state the fare upon ordering.

I did not meet any travellers in Bishkek and the personnel at my hotel knew nothing about Kyrgyzstan's attractions, so I had to improvise. Guidebooks about the country were also vague, almost as if they were written by people, who had never been to Kyrgyzstan.

This is was the last leg of my holiday, and it would have been nice to finish the trip with something spectacular. At least half spectacular as the magnetism of Khiva or the mystery of Bukhara, or the Turkistan's mausoleum.

I remember the photo album my parents had about Kirgizia, Kyrgyzstan's name under the USSR structures. It was stunning the landscape was incredible. However, I did not have that album with me, and I had no idea where to look for those views and places. I had the country's topographic map in my head, and a few things did stand out.

First was the Issyk-Kul Lake, a large reservoir positioned centrally in the country. The second were the super high, mountains

permanently capped with snow all year round, rising above 7,000 meters above the sea level. And a couple of other spots, which however were out of reach for me, given my tight itinerary.

After having wrestled with my thoughts for a few hours, I decided to see the lake and perhaps the high peaks, at least from a distance. I figured that if I went to Karakol, a town I remembered from the guidebooks, I might achieve the objective. The route, or actually two different routes, led along the lake's shores and the town was relatively near the highest of the Tien Shan mountains in the country.

As the decision about the destination was made, it was time to decide on the mode of transport. The choice was limited. I could take a minibus travelling along the northern shore of the lake or a minibus making the journey along the southern shore. Or I could hire a private taxi for my exclusive use.

Given the flexibility and the prices, I opted for a private taxi. It was a good move.



Karakol

Formerly known as Przewalski, Karakol is not a very attractive town, and yet it is reportedly at the centre of Kyrgyzstan's tourism industry. This is due to the magnificent Tien Shan mountains nearby, one of its peaks reaching 7439m - Jengish Chokusu.

The town named after Nikolai Przewalski twice in the past, gladly adopted its historical name after Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union. The Kyrgyz believe that Mr Przewalski, who travelled extensively in the Issyk-Kul Lake area was responsible for mass expulsions of the Kyrgyz by the Russian magnates. And it was Lenin and his revolution that saved them. When Mr Przewalski reported to the throne of Tsar Nikolai II how wonderful the lake was, the nobility wanted the lake for themselves. This is how the expulsions might have started, which resulted in the locals losing their land and homes.

For some reason, Karakol is considered the main tourist destination of the country. This statement is often made bold, without a more detailed explanation why. Most definitely it is not because of Karakol itself.

It must be because of the landscape near the town. In fact, there were not that many places to stay in the town, when I came. Most visitors to the area stayed on the meadows and in the mountains, which did not make Karakol a lively place, and tourism must have contributed to the town's economy in a very mysterious way, which did not seem to have been leaving any visible signs of success. Despite the status of 'the tourism capital of Kyrgyzstan'.

It took about 4h20' to reach Karakol on a private taxi from Bishkek with stops for photographs on the way, disturbance by villagers who blocked the highway since the local authorities could not secure the delivery of hot water and electricity to the village, and a controlled rock disposal from a cliff next to the highway, some 50 kilometres away from that village. It was a good and

comfortable ride, though and I had freedom, which way I wanted to go.

I arrived in Karakol later than I originally planned and I quickly stepped out to see what the town was about.

I was shocked! From reading in the literature that Karakol received most of the tourists who come to Kyrgyzstan at all, I expected a nicely developed town, full of facilities, sights, clubs, restaurants, cafes, etc. No way! Karakol was a crumbling little place with nothing to do or see, apart from an interesting wooden church. The town was dominated by grey blocks of flats, government buildings and somewhat interesting small houses. But there was nothing pretty about the place. If there were no mountains around, there would be absolutely no reason to come here at all!

Fortunately, the mountains were in the vicinity and there were many of them. Many in the immediate vicinity of the town rose well above 3,000 meters above sea level, and not far away there are 7,000+ meters



peaks, which made Karakol the base and gateway for the trekking and climbing. And yet, I did not spot any agencies organising any of those... This was a mystery.

A visit to Karakol requires careful planning. There is really no point in staying in the town, while there are some great outdoors to explore in the neighbourhood. As I did not see any travel offices in Karakol, so I figured that planning of any outdoor activities in Tien Shan must have been better initiated in Bishkek. I did not do that, and again I had to improvise. But for now, I was in the town, so I wanted to pass a proper judgement about it.

I have struggled to pinpoint my favourite place in Karakol. An obvious choice would be the old wooden church, Karakol's main attraction, but I was hoping to perhaps like something else also. To be completely honest, I did not find the town very attractive at all. I mean, it was a fine place to see, but there was nothing spectacular about it. Its architecture definitely did not impress me and since weather was a bit

lousy, I almost felt a regret of having travelled all that way to get there, only to be faced with nothing to do and nothing to see.

As time passed, I think about Karakol from a different perspective. I definitely do not regret to have gone there, but I wish I had planned my visit slightly better, so I would have enjoyed it more.

Tranquility was definitely Karakol's strength. There was absolutely nothing going on in the town. It looked like an empty film set, created for a drama based in a cold, cold back-water province of a Soviet Union, where action was taking place at the end of the 19th century. A few streets running out of the flamboyant Soviet-style centre, were lined with simple, single storey, square houses in a varied state of disrepair.

I came on a cloudy day, and I could not contemplate the mountain views. My hopes to catch a glimpse of the very high 7,000+ metres peaks were shattered, as weather did not make it sensible to hop outside the town to try seeing them.

Only one thing in the town was worth seeing - the old wooden church. It was surrounded by an utterly ugly 5 foot concrete fence and almost pleasant apple orchard inside.

The wooden structure of the temple looked as if it was engineered purposely for a fairy-tale movie that was filmed very long time ago. It was not looked after very well, it seemed to me. The unused side doors resembled gates of a heavy machinery factory (завод) rather than gates of a church.

Inside, the church was recently renovated. The white and blue paints looked fresh and the wooden floor lacquered like a few days before. The décor was minimalistic for an Orthodox Christian church. Photography was forbidden for a completely unknown reason. Since there was no-one around I ignored the sign (only in Russian) and snapped with my iPhone - making sure no flash was used.

I stayed at the Guesthouse Elita, which appeared as a result from a few Internet search engines. It was located

inconveniently far away from the centre but since there was nothing to do in the town it didn't matter. The guesthouse was really clean. The owner was friendly and the rooms were spacious and almost homey. My en suite triple (double+foldable single) for single use was 900 soms, which was great value for money. It included home-cooked breakfast - fried eggs, tomatoes, sausage, bread, cheese, pancakes, plum juice, and a pot of tea or coffee.

The owners locked the iron gate after 10pm but there was someone to open up when you rang. I was under the impression that I was the only guest in the house, it was so quiet. I think there were only about six rooms anyway. But six other guests stayed as well. The whole atmosphere was like a friendly and comfortable shelter in the mountains.

The taxi drivers did not always know where the guesthouse was, even from the business card, which the owner handed to her guests. But most of the taxis had radios and could ask for directions from other drivers or the

operator. Not that anyone would have to use a taxi in Karakol, but when it rained (at night when I visited) it wasn't a bad idea as it was a good hike from... everywhere in the town, really.

As for hangouts, a few cafes near the local government building selling the usual fare of shashliks kept attracting both locals and travellers. They were rustic and nothing special but otherwise lively, at least in the afternoon. In the evening, the majority of them were empty. I was under the impression that they might be a curfew in place, or something. I could not believe that the nation so keen on relaxing and taking it easy would not chill in a cafe with their friends.

Other than cafes, there were a couple of small parks on both sides of the large government building, and a park-like alley between a dual lane street running from the university square away in the opposite direction of the old church. There were a few benches but no other facilities. Both parks were densely populated with trees,

which made them very intimate and perfect places for hiding. Particularly if one wanted to steal a kiss from their partner...

Nightlife? Hmm... I have to say that there was no nightlife in Karakol. I asked about a dozen of locals and a few tourists and no-one could recommend anything. The closest spot to a disco was an open-air cafe opposite Iljusha Cafe (Кафе Илюша) right in the centre, which played loud unambitious 1980s music from a tape player, like Modern Talking and CC Catch, and some people danced or attempted to move according to the rhythm. But most of the guests, including the females, were really drunk. I observed the scene for a while from behind the fence and I could not force myself to enter.

There was absolutely and definitely nowhere else to party or to mingle with the Karakolans or travellers.

Cafe Zarina (Зарина) had an over-the-top décor with shiny marble floor, old style curtains, shiny ceiling. All that cost and it





was not even cozy but rather cold and artificial. It was almost empty when I came at about 6pm so I was about to turn around but I spotted a few locals at one table. I decided to risk it.

I ordered Ukrainian Borschtsch, Chinese style dumplings, a pot of green tea and a pint of beer and it came at 231 soms. The soup was nice with plenty of red cabbage, potatoes and beef. The dumplings were quite tasty but some of them were still cold inside indicating that they had been cooked from frozen. Green tea was lovely. Beer was fine and served in a narrow pint glass with a straw (!) I decided not to go there again and I really did not have to.

Trekking, climbing, horseback riding and spending a night in a yurt is what Karakol is a gateway for. Eco-Tourism is big nowadays in Kyrgyzstan and often also branded as community-based tourism. I met a group of teenagers who came to the country to help build something in a mountainous village near Karakol. I did ask them about Karakol, whether it was a nice place, but they mysteriously managed to avoid answer the question directly. Perhaps they did not enjoy

their holiday to the full. I do not know. Anyway, if one does not plan to do any big outdoor activities, then Karakol is not one of the most exciting places to visit.

Karakol is connected with the capital by minibuses and taxis. The minibuses run either along the northern or the southern shore of the Lake Issyk-Kul. Both take approximately five to six hours, but the southern route is more spectacular. It is closer to the lake and views of the mountains are better.

From Karakol, I expected much but I did not get. Then, weather turned bad. It got stormy and clouds covered all the views of the magnificent mountains. My only hope for the last day of my holiday rested with Kyrgyz second prime tourist destination - the Issyk-Kul Lake.

Actually, for the summer it was the first. Mainly to the Russians and the Kazakhs. This time round, I travelled on the road along the southern shore of the lake. It is better for two reasons: a/ it runs closer to the lake, b/ it allows for entering a few valleys up into the mountains.

Weather did not improve much and there were no good views either of the lake or the mountains surrounding it. Even up the valleys, clouds hang so low that it was impossible to see anything and the soil was so slippery that hiking was very hazardous. I was indeed disappointed. I drove and drove for five hours and I could not see the spectacular scenery.

I eventually stopped for a spectacular lunch. In a yurt! It was a trout from the Issyk-Kul lake. Grilled to perfection. Plus I washed it down with lovely tea and ... sour fermented horse milk. It was not the best one I tasted as it was already a little too sour. This was confirmed by the local taxi driver who drove me around.

The End

All names in this report are true and the story should be entirely accurate. All photographs were taken by the author during the trip, except satellite photo by NASA (copyright free). All rights reserved.