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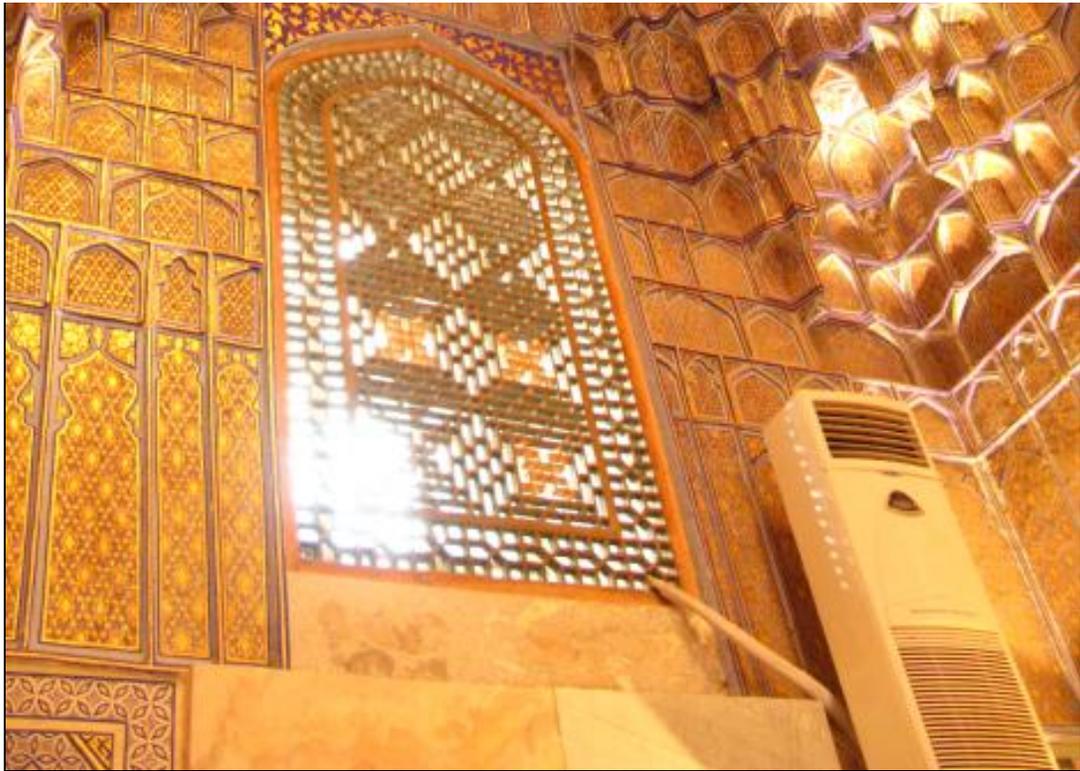
The silk road to Samarkand

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People much more important than us have been enchanted by Samarkand. One of the key hubs of the silk road, and critical for its significant location between Italy and China, Samarkand is allegedly one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world. Historians say that the city was founded in 700 BC, and by the time Alexander the Great conquered Samarkand, it was lovely enough for him to exclaim something in the nature of “Everything I heard about Samarkand is indeed true, except that it’s much more beautiful than I ever imagined.”





Inside the Gur Emir

Samarkand still retains this mythical beauty and its storied restlessness. Today it's a large city - as full of foundries and factories and car repair shops as of mosques and museums and bazaars. Wandering around the city at sunset, Arvind and I sat at the foot of the statue of Amir Timur and watched with equal fascination the whizzing cars and bustling citizens, and the glow of the Gur Emir Mosque, back-lit for tourists, and in the distance, barely visible from where we sat, the eerily unstable towers of Registan.

When we decided to come to Samarkand, I had no idea what to expect. For me, Samarkand's name evokes such a confusion of imagery - Alexander and his great army, Genghis Khan, Timur and his determined rebuilding of the golden city, and later of course, the Soviet rule of Uzbekistan. Over-riding all these great historical events was the main reason that Arvind and I had moved westwards to Central Asia - the image of the silk road merchants - the dusty roads, the vast land, the loaded camels, the merchants who trekked long distances in the name of commerce.





It is to Samarkand's credit that despite my garbled longings and confusions, the city did not disappoint me. Though, of course there were no long robed merchants, nor silk carrying camels, the city was undoubtedly magical and vaguely mysterious.

It's difficult to pick a specific reason for Samarkand's attraction - its not as picturesque as the much restored Khiva nor as warmly friendly as the equally beautiful Bukhara, but when I first stood at the center of the dusty square of Registan, gazing up at the leaning minarets and the slanted arcs of Ulugbek's madrassah, or when I ducked into the lines of mausoleums of the Shah-i-Zinda, or even when I gazed down onto the storied tomb of Timurlane, I had a sense of being dislocated from my life. If you had come upon me then, and asked me who I was - it may have taken me a few moments before I remembered the answer. It is not just that history lingers in the many walls of the city - it does that, no doubt - its more that Samarkand - not as jewel-like as Bukhara, not as proud as Taskent - is more secure in its heritage and identity than any place I have met before. Even now, at arguably the lowest point of its history, Samarkand's confidence is such that it overrides the identity of the onlooker. More than anywhere else in the world, in Samarkand, i felt both uplifted by the potential of the human race and aware of my own insignificance in the face of all that had come before me, and all that would inexorably come after my life time.



Yet, despite my sense of dislocation - I have been wandering around narrow sandy streets, my head dizzy from the constant upward tilt of my head as I gaze at more and more turquoise domes and giddy arcs - instead of being humbled at the beauty around me, as I have often been in other less beautiful cities, I am lit by strange dreams. Samarkand is now a big city, all around me I see Tajik ladies and Russian men and Iranian children - yet, curving along its



A slice of Shah-i-Zinda

sandy lanes and narrow streets, I sometimes feel that a caravan of silk merchants are right ahead of me and if I ran I could catch up with them. I think that soon someone might offer to trade in persimmons, or jasmine, or the rose that made its way from China to the west. I think that someone may whisper to me the harshly guarded secret of paper making. Over and over, I have to tell myself to not be silly,

that those times have passed.

And then it happens - aptly, I am at Siab bazaar buying figs for breakfast. The man - he is tall for an Asian, his eyes are green, there is an oddly Grecian cast to his face though he speaks quickly in tajik - he is sorrowed at how little I buy - and tries to persuade me with walnuts and grapes. And then the moment I have foreseen comes to pass - my trader withdraws from his pocket a small silk wrapped bag - I smell its contents even before he speaks - Saffron? he asks me - from Iran? And the bazaar tilts a bit around me - and I feel the magic from the past, and the dust at my feet feels ancient and the silks on the next stall are transformed. Suddenly I notice that the lady selling rice has Chinese features and that man in the corner looks exactly like one of my Italian friends, and the Tajik ladies speak a language that is not dissimilar to Hindi. Once the whole world had gathered here, in Samarkand, bartering, selling, buying. The small pouch of saffron seems to glow with the promise of other times. And then the moment passes, and I am merely a tourist and he just a salesman, with perhaps a bit of Greek soldier in his blood. I pay for my bag of fruit and move on.

In case you, like me, decide to make the journey to Samarkand - here is some practical advice:

Where to stay: We were very pleased with the Sherdor Hotel at M.Koshgari 91 where the English speaking concierge, Shahruq looked after our needs as well as any family.

What to see:

At the barest minimum you must linger at the Gur Emir mausoleum, The Registan Square, Shah-i-Zinda and the Siab Bazaar. History buffs will love the Afrosiab museums.

Guide books -

The lonely planet is full of practical advice, dispensed dully. The Odyssey guide is much better researched and offers more detail. Regardless of your guide book, its worth hiring a taxi to take you around for a day - we were pleased with Sergei - a terse, chain smoking Russian giant with a rattly car, broken English and a kind heart. His number is - 223-1555.

Where to eat -

There are lots of touristy restaurants that follow all the rules of hygiene. But for the real deal the narrow lane behind the Ulugbek observatory is full of chaikhana grilling sashlyks and offering plate loads of plov. You may fall sick later, but its still worth eating in a place that popular with local folk.

Guided tour of Uzbekistan:

if you are keen to travel to Uzbekistan but don't want the hassle of independent travel, you could contact Komil at info@komiltravel.com. He'd help you get organized with guides, city transfers etc. We stayed at his hotel at Bukhara and found him reliable and helpful.

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