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ICONIC ITINERARIES

Curious about the two-century gap in her family's itinerant history, Sarah Khan journeys to Uzbekistan to uncover tales of those who came before

in search

Outside the
15th-century Bibi
Khanym mosque,
in Samarkand

of lost time

PHOTOGRAPH:
EDUARDO TEIXEIRA DE SOUSA





From left: Inside the Sitorai-Mokhi-Khosa Palace in Bukhara; a Soviet-era car carrying Uzbek melons in Bukhara; Poi-Kalyan, an Islamic religious complex in Bukhara; handwoven rugs in Bukhara

all

of words that were both foreign and recognizable. Standing in front of Bolo Hauz, an 18th-century mosque in the ancient city of Bukhara, I felt as if the country had a sense of where I'd come from, too. I was trying to photograph the reflection of 20 wood-carved columns in the hauz—pond—that gives the mosque its name when an elderly man stopped my guide, Abdulaziz Isomov, for a chat. They shot me glances and grins, so I put down my phone and joined them.

“He says you look like the descendants of Babur,” said Abdulaziz.

I smiled. I may not count a Mughal ruler among my ancestors, but there was a glimmer of truth in the man's statement: Babur did, in fact, pave the way for my forefathers when he conquered Delhi to found India's Mughal Empire.

The phrase *Silk Road* evokes caravans on the horizon spinning a colossal web across the desert, with mountains of gossamer fabrics, ideologies, and discoveries ferried from China to Europe and back. But when I hear the words, I think not of ancient thoroughfares but of a lofty, hard-to-reach branch of my family tree. My

father, a tireless historian of our ancestors' peregrinations across the Muslim world, can trace our roots back 40 generations, from Arabia to Andalus, the Ottoman Empire, Jerusalem, Baghdad, Central Asia, India, and, eventually, Massachusetts and Manhattan. I grew up in the Middle East, have traveled to Spain and Turkey, and visit India regularly. But the Uzbek stopover from the 15th to the 17th century remains an enigma of my family's itinerant history.

I've longed for years to tread in the footsteps of the five generations of my family who lived in Samarkand and Bukhara. A cookie-cutter tour couldn't truly contextualize the lives they led during the Silk Road's heyday, so I turned to Zulya Rajabova, founder of Silk Road Treasure Tours, who has been crafting itineraries across Central Asia as well as Mongolia, China, and the Caucasus region for 25 years. Over several months of calls, I shared an ad hoc array of details and desires—the names my father had parsed from yellowing records as well as every landmark I'd ever read about, from Samarkand's majestic Registan, an ancient public square filled with monuments, to grandiose metro stations hollowed beneath Tashkent. My father deduced that a Syed Adham Rifaai landed in Bukhara



from Jerusalem around 1470, and several generations later, Khaja Abdullah Khan Rifaai left for Delhi in 1680 at the invitation of Emperor Aurangzeb. Zulya made sense out of my wants and wove a six-day journey around them that took me from Tashkent to Samarkand and then to Bukhara by train.

As silk became as valuable as gold—and at times, more so—a network of wealthy cities emerged along this 2,200-year-old route. When famed Moroccan adventurer Ibn Battuta visited Samarkand in the 1330s, he described it as “one of the greatest and finest of cities, and most perfect of them in beauty.” Later that century, the legendary Mongol conqueror Timur mounted relentless campaigns from the Mediterranean to India, carting back riches and thousands of artisans to erect towering tributes to his greatness. Mosques, madrassas, and mausoleums were festooned in teal and indigo mosaic tiles and crowned with the azure domes that became a signature of Central Asian architecture.

From just the right angle on a clear day, the Registan Square’s luminous domes melt into the sky. It’s no wonder that this palette of blue—so dizzying that it stretched my understanding of the color’s possibilities—became such a fixture on the dry, landlocked

steppes of Central Asia. The varied shades are imbued with longing: for water, something these arid plains sorely lacked, and for peace, which always seemed just out of reach with successive waves of conflict. Registan, an ensemble of three imposing madrassas inscribed in Kufic calligraphy, ranked with the Taj Mahal and the Pyramids among the most dazzling monuments I have ever seen. After falling to neglect, the Registan Square has been restored to—and, some argue, far beyond—its former glory. I marveled at how mesmerizing it must have been for my ancestors when they first glimpsed it, rising alone like a mirage from an expanse of ochre sand.

Abdulaziz took me to the Registan Square three times: in the rain, under sunny skies, and at night. I’m usually reluctant to go to the same place twice when I travel. But Abdulaziz gently nudged me to reconsider. Each return presented the site anew. In the daytime, I watched couples pose for wedding portraits as large tour groups and clusters of students on field trips snaked across the vast piazza. But it was after sunset that the monument truly came to life. We zigzagged through a dusky maze of bazaars and teahouses with crowds picking up textiles and ceramics. I dodged children playing tag and vendors hurling glow-in-the-dark toys into the air as Uzbek music reverberated through the square and fuchsia, violet, and cobalt lights danced across the façade.

During my stay in Samarkand, I checked in to the Bibi Khanum Boutique Hotel, named for the grand mosque Timur built in 1404 in honor of his beloved wife. After centuries of turmoil and Soviet neglect, here it remains today, its fluted turquoise dome looming so close to my window that I might have knocked my head if I leaned out too far.



The entrance to Kalan Mosque, part of the Poi-Kalyan complex in central Bukhara

At the mosque, Abdulaziz introduced me to Jamollidin Mirza Ahmedov, an archaeologist and a member of Uzbekistan's Academy of Sciences who had clearly been briefed about my heritage: "I'm very excited to meet a Baburid!" he exclaimed before pressing into my hands an Uzbek translation of the Baburnama, the emperor's memoirs, as a gift. His eyes twinkled as he delved into an impassioned soliloquy in Uzbek. As Central Asia prospered, Jamollidin told us, trade wasn't limited to silk, precious jewels, spices, and ivory; the Silk Road's mercantile hubs became centers of learning. Arabic was the lingua franca, and scholarship reigned: Timur's grandson, Emperor Mirza Ulugh Beg, was a celebrated astronomer whose work would become widely studied in Renaissance Europe.

Ambitious intellectuals living in the 15th century would have had their sights set on either Florence or Samarkand. For my forefather Syed Adham Rifaai, living in Jerusalem in 1470, the allure of Central Asia, the Arabic world's crucible of finance, scholarship, creativity, and religion, would have been intoxicating. And two centuries later, when emerging sea routes heralded the twilight of the Silk Road, Khaja Abdullah Khan Rifaai might have sensed the route's coming decline and gotten itchy feet. It was time to seek the next land of opportunity, on the road the Timurid prince turned Emperor Babur had charted a century and a half earlier: India.

As I climbed 40 steep stairs to the lavishly tiled tombs of Samarkand's Shahi Zinda necropolis, I fell in with pilgrims who had traveled from across the Muslim world to recite prayers by the grave of one of the Prophet's companions. For thousands of years, Siyop Bazaar set the stage for merchants passing from Xi'an to Constantinople to trade in both wares and gossip from along the Silk Road. Trailing Abdulaziz into the labyrinthine market that surrounds the necropolis, I found the modern-day scene no less of a spectacle, with hawkers bantering jovially over displays of handwoven carpets, ikat scarves, and dried fruits laid out in Bibi Khanum's shadow.

Three days after arriving in Samarkand, I headed to Bukhara. Zulya had arranged for me to meet Zufar Qoryogdiev, a Bukhara State University professor of ethnography and anthropology with a specialty in Sufism, at the memorial complex of Bahauddin Naqshband, the region's most revered saint. Zufar did some research before our meeting and was convinced that my ancestors would have been a part of this order—and that some may even have been buried here, in the tidy rows of elm-shaded graves. I murmured a prayer at Bahauddin's tomb in a courtyard under a massive mulberry tree. "You're walking where, hundreds of years ago, your ancestors must have," said Zulya.

Her words were still with me on a clear morning when Zulya and I arrived at a landmark that felt familiar. My ancestors eventually made their way to Hyderabad, in India's Deccan plateau, settling there until my parents' generation migrated west. At the historic heart of Hyderabad stands the Charminar, an ornate archway erected in 1591 whose four sepia-tinted minarets are emblematic of the city. I was flummoxed the first time I read about Uzbekistan's own Chor Minor. Given Bukhara's 2,500-year history and the prevalence of Central Asian influences in India's culture, cuisine, architecture, and vocabulary, I'd assumed the Hyderabad version was a replica. In Bukhara, I discovered the two are not clones of each other—here, the four tawny turrets are topped in vivid turquoise ceramic tiles, naturally. Still, I'm sure trading trips to India inspired the Turkmen merchant who conceived of the one in Samarkand.

The Mughals carried their tandors, their samsas, their dasturkhan tablecloths, their domed mausoleums, their zardozi threadwork with them to India, which in turn absorbed this rich cultural legacy. Centuries later, after Silk Road cosmo-

politanism was subsumed by Communism, many of Uzbekistan's landmarks suffered from Soviet neglect. When Uzbekistan gained its independence, its newly formed Uzbek government was quick to restore its treasures, often enlisting local craftsmen to work closely with their peers in India to learn how.

On my last evening in Bukhara, Zulya invited me to join her family to celebrate the sallabandan of her niece Nargisa. I filed into the restaurant in a procession that reminded me of an Indian wedding, holding trays of gifts and following a band of musicians. The ceremony is an important milestone in Bukharan households, marking a woman's transition to motherhood: "It's every mother's responsibility to do sallabandan for their daughter," Zulya explained as Nargisa's mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law wrapped a white muslin cloth around her head and draped her in a scarlet veil with gold embroidery. There was magic in the familiarity of the moment, of generations imparting traditions from one to the next. Which hardly surprised me at all. 

how this trip was made

"You are one of us!" said Zulya Rajabova, the founder of Silk Road Treasure Tours and a Bukhara native, the first time we Zoomed. Over the months that followed, her team took care of visas and thoughtfully drew an itinerary from my long wish list, matching me to experts from Zulya's vast Rolodex of contacts to bring the Silk Road's history to life. And I wasn't bound by the itinerary. After I arrived in Tashkent, Abdulaziz Isomov, my guide, took me to a residential neighborhood in pursuit of beautifully tailored silk ikat pants from the chic concept shop Bibi Hanum. And on my final day in Bukhara, a last-minute request got me inside the studio of seventh-generation potter Shokhrukh Rakhimov for ceramics that now live on my shelves in New York City.

Silk Road Treasure Tours can arrange ten-day itineraries through Uzbekistan from \$530 per person, per day. For more Iconic Itineraries, where Condé Nast Traveler editors partner with our top travel specialists on trips to our favorite destinations, see cntraveler.com/iconic-itineraries.