

JEWEL OF THE STANS

TRAVELLING BY LUXURY TRAIN THROUGH UZBEKISTAN, TRICIA WELSH DISCOVERS MAGNIFICENT MOSQUES, MADRASSAHS AND MAUSOLEUMS, SEES A REVIVAL OF ANCIENT SKILLS AND CRAFTS – AND LEARNS A LITTLE RUSSIAN ALONG THE WAY.



“

Spasiba – spa-sea-bar,” suggests our tour manager, Anna. Anna who is teaching a few of us some useful words in Russian as we travel through Uzbekistan aboard the Golden Eagle Luxury Train. “When you think of a vacation,” she declares, “you need a ‘spa’, you need the ‘sea’ and you need a ‘bar’. Spasiba!”

Indeed, it is the only way I can recall how to say “Thank you” in Russian, as we also try to negotiate the Cyrillic alphabet. We learn numbers, how to greet people, how to ask simple questions and heartily sing the universally loved classic folk-style song, *Kalinka*.

I am one of just 26 guests aboard the Golden Eagle Luxury Train discovering the ‘Treasures of Uzbekistan’ and, I admit, it does help to have a few words in Russian as we travel through Central Asia, where Russian is the second language. As part of the Soviet Union until independence in 1991, most Uzbeks learnt Russian at school, but are now becoming fluent in English as the country opens up to tourism from the West.

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We’ve heard about the ‘Stans’ – but where and what are they? There are five independent Stans forming part of Central Asia. Uzbekistan, double landlocked, is the most central of them, surrounded by four other landlocked countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

We have flown into the Uzbek capital, Tashkent, from all corners of the globe: from Canada, the US, the UK, Australia and a group of Spanish speakers from South America who have their own guide. After a welcome dinner at the Tashkent Hyatt Regency and a city tour next day, we start to get a feel for this secular country of 35 million whose dominant religion is Islam.

Hit by an 8.5 earthquake in 1966, which destroyed half the city, Tashkent is the largest city in Central Asia and today boasts huge, modern, marble public buildings interspersed with Soviet-era concrete tower blocks. Fortunately there is also an ‘Old City’.

As in other major Uzbek cities, we note wide tree- and garden-lined boulevards with six to eight lanes of traffic – mainly locally made white Chevrolet cars – a real sense of order and the most obliging and polite people. As I enter a crowded carriage for a short ride on the city’s underground metro, an entire carriage bench is vacated as everyone stands to offer me their seat! Inspired by the more elaborate metro in Moscow, the stations are indeed decorative, Kosmonavtlar commemorating cosmonauts like Yuri Gagarin and the first female cosmonaut, Valentina Tereshkova.

In Tashkent’s Old City – dating back 2,000 years – we ponder the first of myriad turquoise domed complexes at Khazrati-Imam, which hold us in awe. It’s shoes off and headscarves on as we enter the 5,000-man Hazrati Imam Mosque before a visit to the Muy Mubarek Madrassah and a quiet shuffle in to view the ancient Uthman Koran at the madrassah library. The Khast Imam, as this group of 16th-century monuments is also known, is the country’s official religious centre and has been renovated in recent years, thanks to billionaire Uzbek-Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov, at the time a shareholder in English football team Arsenal.

At the contemporary Plov Lounge and Bar, we have our first taste of the national dish, plov, a hearty serving of rice with vegetables topped with shredded lamb or beef, and perhaps with a few slices of horse sausage for good measure. And we’re exposed to beautiful traditional handicrafts – ikat, suzani, pottery, jewellery, metal carvings, elaborate embroideries, in Tashkent’s Museum of Applied Arts – once the private home of an Imperial Russian diplomat.

We’re given a red-carpet Champagne welcome with a traditional Karnay-Surnay long-horn musical fanfare at Tashkent railway station, where our handsome mid-blue train stretches literally half a kilometre down the platform. Stewards for each carriage await our arrival; luggage is already in our respective compartments.





The Golden Eagle Luxury Train: a privileged setting from which to discover the 'Treasures of Uzbekistan'.

I've been upgraded from Silver to Gold Class, which sleeps two in either a double lower bed or single upper, has individual air-conditioning, television and private bathroom with separate shower cubicle, and underfloor heating. Two couples have reserved the luxurious Imperial Suites that come with private guide and chauffeured car service, a bottle of Dom Perignon on arrival, a comprehensive mini bar and the option of dining in-cabin.

Life onboard is sweet. With 80 per cent of the country's 447,000 square kilometres desert, travel is mostly by night. Service is attentive, the all-Russian staff young and keen to please.

Breakfasts are a treat, with fresh juices and fruit,

smoothies, charcuterie, house-made pastries, smoked salmon and red caviar, eggs cooked as you like, and with a daily special – perhaps pancakes stuffed with sweet tvorog cheese.

All meals comprise three courses. Our welcome dinner menu starts with either lobster with guacamole, baked paprika sauce and spicy kimchi sauce or broccoli tartlet. Next comes duck breast with rosemary sauce, poached pear and carrot mousse or white bean risotto with porcini mushrooms, truffles and Grana Padano cheese. Dessert is tiramisu with coffee and brandy.

One night we are treated to a Champagne and caviar dinner. The Mœt flows, as generous bowls of caviar – black sturgeon from the Caspian Sea and red Pacific salmon –

are served with blinis and traditional garnishes. Duck leg confit or ricotta and spinach ravioli follows.

The convivial lounge bar is the place to be before and after dinner. While guests might sip champagne cocktails and vodka martinis, classically trained pianist Artur Bobikyan provides a beautiful musical backdrop of popular, classical and original tunes.

Some days, we enjoy lunch or dinner off-train as we are on full-day excursions, perhaps to learn about fine ceramics in Rishtan, silk or ikat weaving in Margilan or paper-making in Konigil village – all important crafts traded along this vital ancient caravan route – and enjoy occasional live entertainment by local traditional dance troupes.

Who knew about the extraordinary collection of nearly

100,000 avant-garde paintings at the Savitsky Museum of Fine Arts in the far northwest city of Nukus? Known as the 'Louvre in the Sands', it was founded in 1966 by celebrated artist and ethnographer Igor Savitsky, who rescued many works by Russian and Uzbek dissident artists banned by Stalin.

But it's the three gems of Khiva, Bukhara and legendary Samarkand we're keen to discover. These cities date back more than two millennia and have witnessed the ebb and flow of empires and the passage of legendary figures. Alexander the Great traversed these lands in the 4th century, leaving an indelible mark; Genghis Khan, the Mongol conqueror, swept through in the 13th century, reshaping the cultural landscape; and Tamerlane, the Turko-Mongol conqueror, made Samarkand his capital in

the 14th century, adorning it with architectural wonders such as exquisite Registan Square.

These cities served as pivotal hubs, connecting East and West, flourishing as centres of commerce, culture and scholarship. Today, their UNESCO-listed monuments stand as testament to the enduring legacy of civilizations that thrived amidst adversity.

Khiva is essentially a living museum, with well-preserved Islamic architecture within high city walls. Entering through beautiful carved doors to the old city, Ichan Kala, we are enchanted by its labyrinthine streets and historic structures, such as the 28-metre-high unfinished minaret and Juma Mosque. Stallholders sell fur hats, ceramics, wood carvings, silk carpets, ikat clothing and we find ourselves following a wedding group heading to the mosque to receive the Imam's

within its walls, today it is uninhabited with most of the place in ruins. Genghis Khan spared the towering 47m-high Kalon Minaret, with its magnificent tile work, when he ransacked the city in the 13th century. Nearby covered bazaars beckon with vibrant local arts and crafts. We lunch on traditional cuisine in a rooftop restaurant overlooking the Old City.

Dominating the very heart of Samarkand is breathtaking Registan Square, with its three majestic madrassahs, among the world's oldest, showing Islamic architecture.

Most of today's attractions date from Tamerlane's 14th-century reign, the tyrant conqueror Timur "The Lame", who plundered nearby territories to enrich his capital at Samarkand. There are statues, monuments and reminders of him everywhere – including the Bibi-Khanum mosque, built for his wife, and beautiful Shah-i-Zinda necropolis – its avenue of mausoleums displaying some of the richest tile work in the Muslim world.

We wander lively Dehqon Siyob, or farmers' market, where dried fruit and nuts sellers are doing a thriving trade in pistachios, dried apricots stuffed with walnuts, almonds, dates, and myriad spices – all products traded along the ancient Silk Road.

Samarkand is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world and considered one of the most magnificent. Some 2,400 years ago, Alexander the Great was moved to remark about this almost mythical city: "Everything that I heard about Samarkand is all true, absolutely everything! Except one thing: it turned out to be more beautiful than I could imagine."

Everything is included on these exceptional journeys: all transfers, portorage, 24-hour cabin service, an on-board English-speaking doctor, fully guided off-train excursions with local guides, all drinks (except premium) in the Bar Lounge Car and with meals, gratuities and occasional authentic dining experiences in local restaurants en route.

And you have to unpack just once while the country comes to you! ■

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blessing. We lunch alfresco at a local restaurant on Khorezmian cuisine: delicious, colourful salads, soft egg-filled dumplings, *tu hum arak*, with yoghurt, beef koftas wrapped in thin omelettes, *kiima Zarafshan*, and oven-warm flatbreads.

Bukhara, founded in the 5th century by the Persian Prince Siyavush, also offers a mesmerising tapestry of history and culture. We explore what's left of the impressive Ark, or fortress, occupied until 1920, when it was bombed by the Red Army. Once the residence of the emirs of Bukhara, with some 3,000 residents living

