Nukus to Samarkand

written by Marcus | 4 June, 2015

It’s compulsory for any blog about a journey to Samarkand to include this poem, so here it is:

We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

By James Elroy Flecker. Full version here.

From Nukus we have the unfamiliar experience of riding up and down some low hills along with the familiar view of sand dunes. It’s another section of road that is in the process of being upgraded but the new part is mostly finished so we drag the bike over to it and have the smooth tarmac to ourselves.

Leaving Karalpaqstan region

After 50km we turn right and find the water that should be in the Aral sea. Again the scenery changes from drab beige to lush green thanks to a network of drainage channels, sluices, pumps and irrigation systems. The fields are full of colour but not from the crops. The women in central Asia wear fantastically vivid floral and pattered dresses and head scarves, even when working amongst the neat rows of cotton and vegetables.

A floating bridge

Most of the work is done by hand but for heavy duty jobs there is usually a 3 wheeled tractor on hand to do the donkey work. Actually no, the donkeys have to do the donkey work. At night the familiar sound of dogs barking is accompanied by the sound of rusty gates blowing in the wind which in fact are donkeys complaining about their terrible hard day of labour.

Hand pump hair wash

In one village we're beckoned over to join a family for chai and fresh bread, curious to see where we're from and how our

bike works. Bread is held with a great degree of reverence here and most houses have a clay tajin oven for cooking several disk shaped loaves each day. Guests are offered bread on arrival and it’s sacrilege to throw any away. We’ve been given stale loaves by passing cars a few times so feeding hungry cycle tourists is clearly a good way to get rid of unwanted bread.

Mobile bread delivery. His back sat was full of loaves!

But with this family we get to see the whole process of bread going into the oven, coming out again and being eaten and it tastes much better fresh.

Preparing the dough

Cooking in the tajin

Fesh and tasty

After two days we arrive at Ichan Kala, the old town of Khiva. At 10m high and nearly as thick, the huge imposing walls make

it look like a huge fortress.

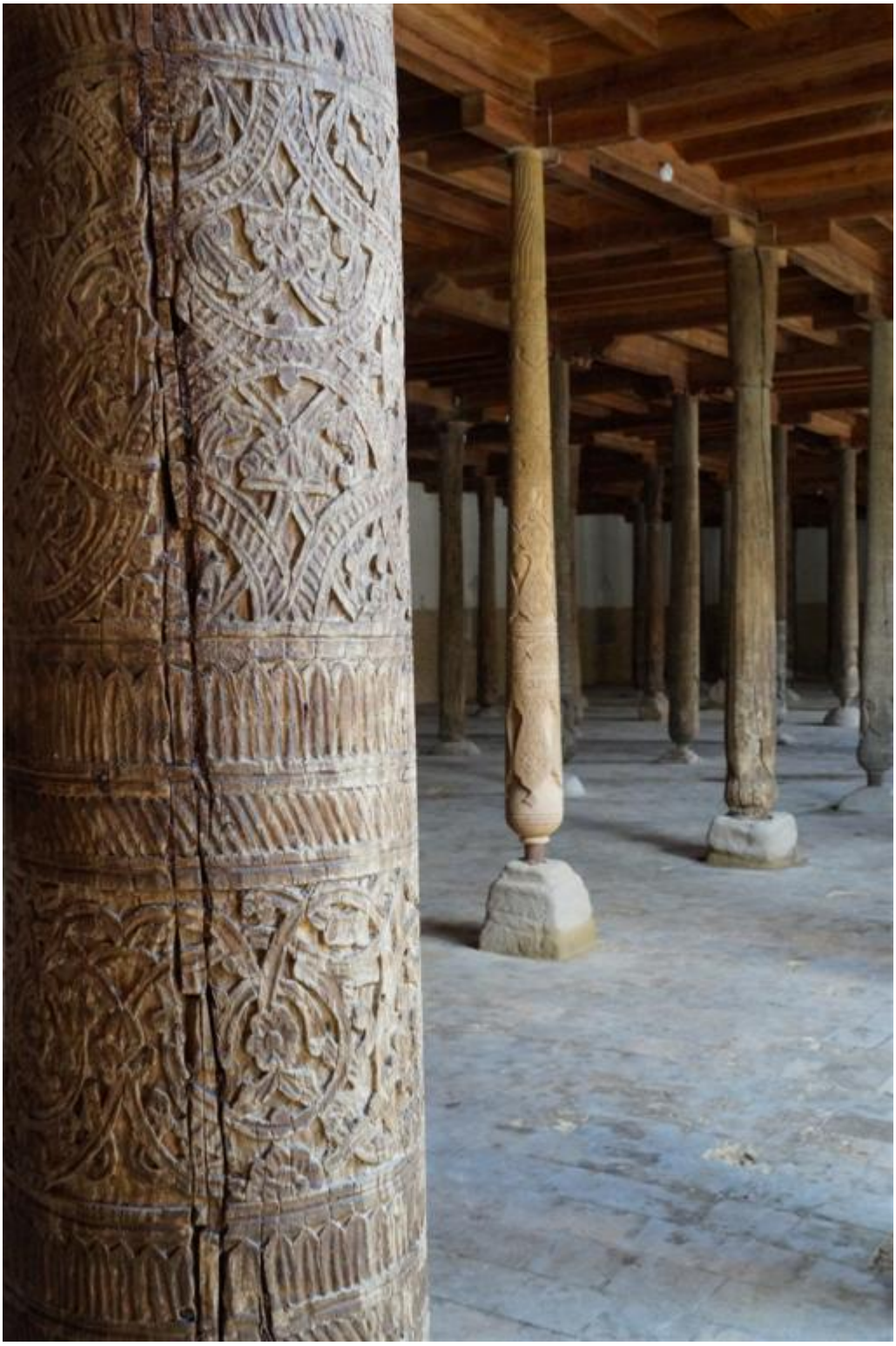
Huge city Walls of Ichan Kala, Khiva

Khiva from the top of a minaret

Like a film set

Inside are a maze of alleyways and narrow, car-free roads. Around every corner are tiled medrassas, mausoleums, minarets

and mosques. Most decorated with exquisite blue and turquoise tiles. It’s like stepping onto the set of an Indianan Jones film. The authenticity is added to by the fact that most of the visitors are Uzbek rather than Western tourists so there are colourful dresses and sequins everywhere. The men just wear jeans and t-shirts.



Djuma Mosque

Most mouths are full of gold

Traditional dancing in Khiva

صد کوه قاف را بهاپون سودن
طاق فلک بخون دل اندودن
صد سال اسیر بند زندان بودن
زانکه دمی هم نامهمدان بودن

Mausoleum of Sayid Alauddin

!00 year old LVIS shepherd’s coat

We spend the night at the excellent Guest House Alibek with a great spread for breakfast and we can just see the Kalta Minor

Minaret peeking over the walls. An ambitious Khan ordered a minaret to be built that was tall enough that he could see Bukhara (400km away) from the top. He died part way through it’s construction so it was abandoned and never reached it’s 75m intended height, but is impressive none the less.

Kalta Minor Minaret

Kalta Minor Minaret

After haggling in the Bazaar and changing some money we're set to go again. The money in Uzbekistan is fairly ridiculous. The official exchange rate is set at 2500 som to the US dollar but the black market rate is usually much better. We manage to get 4000 – 4500 som per dollar from men with holdalls full of cash hanging around bazaars and taxi ranks. The most common note is 1000 som so $50 returns a stack of 200 or so notes. We have to

make a lot of room in our panniers for our new found ‘wealth’ and always feel a bit self conscious pulling out 2″ of notes just to pay for lunch.

Lots of cash with very little value (1000 som = 15p)

Back on the road the local cyclists love to race us on their single speeds, and usually win, even with a passenger on the back who genuinely isn’t pedalling. One cyclist pulls alongside us in a broad rimmed hat and an even broader grin with some kind of spraying machine strapped to the pannier rack.

Dog on the move

Moyrag and sprayer

He pulls up outside his house and darts inside to return with the inevitable disk of bread, then asks if we’d like to stay.

Inside we pass a tiny galley kitchen with the only available water being a tap in the street. The main room has a raised platform where the low table sits on a patchwork of rugs. Our new friend, Moyrag, sits with us while his wife, Sonia begins preparing food and fetching drinks. There’s still a huge amount of inequality in Uzbekistan and we feel a bit uncomfortable by the way she is ordered around while Moyrag does nothing. We’re also joined by his 81 year old mother who,

with years of sitting on floors is remarkably supple and is much more comfortable in the lotus position than we are.

The bread is fresh, the beer strong and the conversation is mostly about how many children we should have. Moyrag suggests 10 and wants us to call him when the first one is born. Family is hugely important here so the fact that we don’t have any children is something they just can’t understand.

A neighbour arrives and practices the Uzbek tradition of guest poaching by inviting us back to his house where of course another full spread is laid out in front of us accompanied by vodka. This house is much smarter with decorated walls and an inside staircase. We learn that the neighbour’s job is in IT which seems to be better paid then Moyrag’s mobile spraying service.

Now with very full bellies we stagger back to our original hosts to enjoy a bit of dancing before it’s time for bed. I’m given a mattress in the living room while Kirsty is offered

Moyrag’s mum’s bed. She has to argue for quite a while that she doesn’t want to make an 81 year old sleep on the floor and they eventually give in. Both of us have a restless night thanks to the tiny occupants of the bedding. They’re riddled with bed bugs.

Sonia is up early to sweep the paths all around the house, to tend to the chickens and to prepare breakfast. Moyrag surfaces late just as the chai is ready and we all have breakfast together then it’s time to say our thanks and hit the road once again. We promise to call in on our second lap of the world.

Moyrag and family

More orderly cotton fields lead us up to a wide, shallow canal which is the last open water that we’ll see for a few days. Emerald green birds that look like large kingfishers swoop over the water and a couple of fishermen are casting their

nets. It’s a rough, sandy track for 20km before we pop out onto the main dual carriageway and have the pleasant feeling of a smooth surface under the tyres and the wind on our backs.

Rickety bridge (we didn’t take the bike over this)

We’re back in the desert but it looks different to the earlier sections. The sand is a reddish orange, there are larger shrubs and there are bigger dunes and more hills. Riding along one ridge we can see down into Turkmenistan.

Looking over to Turmenistan

Lizards scatter from the hard shoulder ranging in size from 4cm up to 30cm and come in a range of colour combinations. In a bizarre incident while we stop at a roadside stall to buy water a truck pulls in and a man in the back holds up a lizard that must be half a metre long. How he caught it and what he plans to do with it we’ll never know.

An unfortunate and large lizzard

It’s also getting hotter with the temperature nudging 37 degC. Cold drinks and ice creams at the chaihanas never tasted so

good. While we lounge in the shade swallows dart in and out of the door and seem to be making nests in the ceiling of every building we stop at. They've got plenty to feed on as there are annoying black flies everywhere too.

Chaihana stop

Nesting swallows in the roof of a Chaihana

The handy tail wind blows us to our longest day yet of 145km and another night camping in the desert. It’s amazing how much life there is in the sand with dozens of types of ants, beetles, bees and spiders. Most are small and harmless but one morning Kirsty goes to put her glove on and something moves inside it then drops to the floor. It’s a huge camel spider, about the size of my hand and it scurries up the bike to hide behind a pannier. They hate sunlight which seems an odd characteristic for an animal that lives in the desert. After much prodding with a stick the spider is extracted but it chases our shadow and climbs back onboard. Eventually I manage to throw it clear and we can continue without the unwanted hitchhiker.

Friendly desert beetle

Camel spider trying to hitch a ride

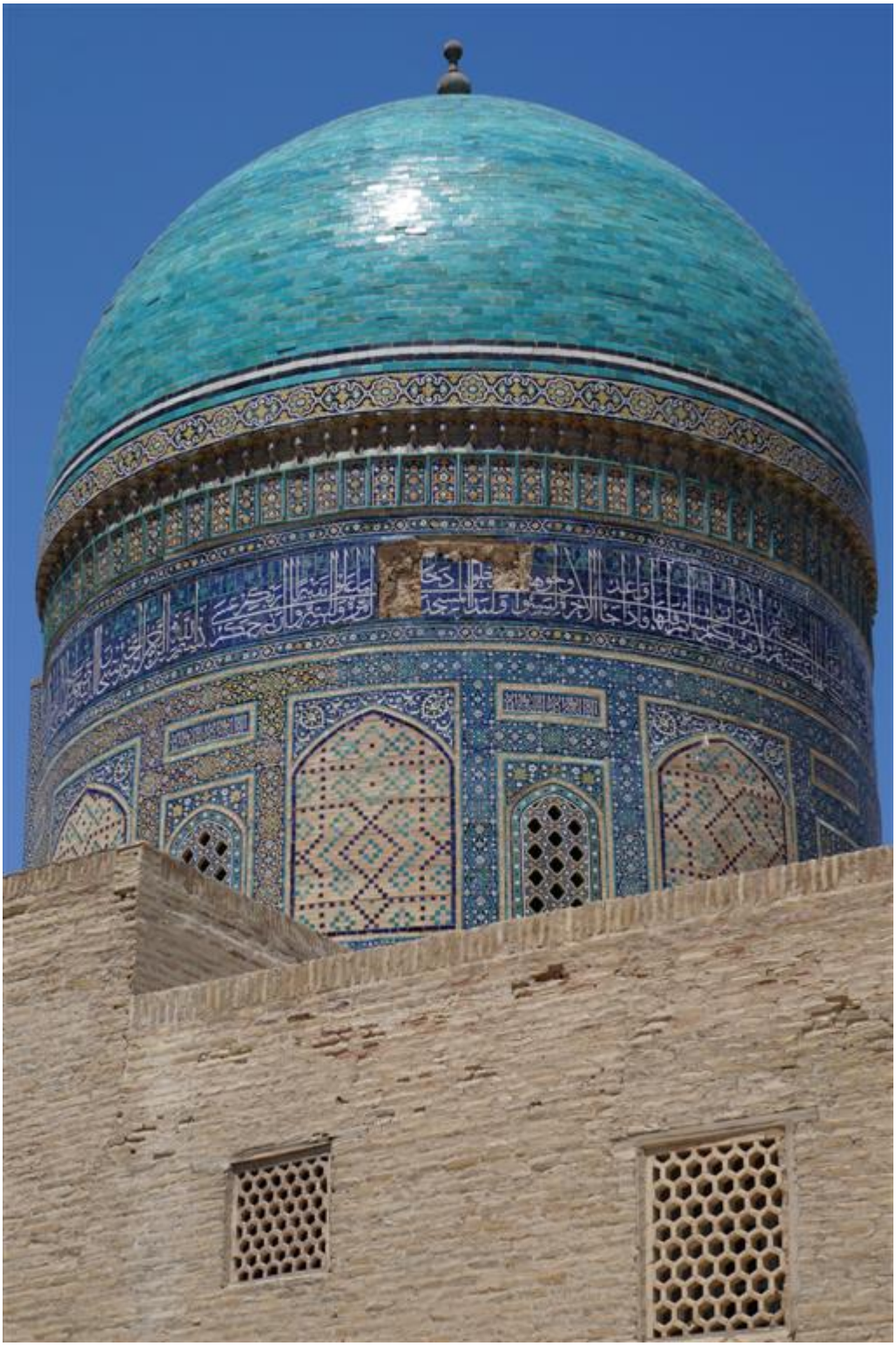
4 days after leaving Khiva we arrive at our next Silk Road town: Bukhara. This is a popular traveler’s destination so we meet several back packers, other cyclists and a family from France travelling to Malasia by camper van with 3 small children. The conversation between the different types of traveller is quite different with the back packers talking about buses, trains and hostels. The cyclists are more interested in road conditions, severity of the hills and weird encounters with the locals.

In the 13th century Genghis Khan came to Bukhara and ordered the whole place to be levelled. But he was so taken by the Kalyan Minaret that he let it be spared. This is definitely a good thing for us as it’s an impressive structure amongst some more wonderful Medrassas and Mosques on a larger scale than Khiva. It’s not so good for the local criminals who were thrown from the top, earning the minaret the nickname of the tower of death. Amazingly this gruesome punnishment was still

taking place up until the 1920s.

Kalyan Minaret

Char Minor



Friday prayers

Samanid mausoleum (C9-10) – also saved from Ghengis Khan as it was burried under sand.

It’s hot work wondering around the town so the following afternoon we head back out on the road and up to a huge reservoir for a refreshing swim, about 40km north of Buchara.

There are a row of cafes alongside the lake so we roll down to one to take a closer look. We’re greeted by four men in their

underpants who invite us to join them for a drink. Luckily the state of undress is optional so we're not expected to strip off, at least not until we're ready to swim. The water is cool but not cold and feels great after the hot days of riding from Khiva. The sun begins to set and we climb out to find the cafe owner offering us fresh fish and a bed for the night in the adjacent building. Just what we needed.

Evening swim

On the other side of the reservoir are some real life, proper hills. I can't remember the last time we saw some of those. We have the road to ourselves for the morning and, apart from a tiny village where we can buy some lunch, we get our last dose of proper desert silence.

Finally some hills emerged out of the flat desert

After climbing a ridge and dropping into the town of Navoi we seek out the Bazaar to buy some fresh fruit. Uzbekistan is famous for its fruit but we're just too early for the popular melon season. Instead we gorge ourselves on sweet cherries, plums and small strawberries. Two bus drivers insist on buying us a drink and also nearly insist on taking me to a barber to have my beard cut off but I manage to persuade them to let me keep it. Only the oldest men have beards so they think I should be clean shaven.

Chaihana Lady

In most towns we've been mobbed whenever we stop with people asking for photos, selfies and in one Chaihana I had to pose with someone's baby. It's highly amusing watching people curiously eyeing up the bike too. After working out how the two sets of cranks turn together they will then usually squeeze the tyres (a thumbs up for being rock solid), look very puzzled at our clip in pedals and finally no-one can

resist giving the horn a squeeze. Whenever we leave the bike we can guarantee to hear a toot from the horn within 3 minutes of walking away.

Everyone loves looking at our map

How does it work?

The wind is strong and favourable for the rest of the day so we make good progress. Just as it gets to campsite spotting time we find ourselves rapidly approaching two other cyclists. It’s Peré and Kim who we had met in Bukhara the day before. After a bit more riding we find a spot for three tents alongside a building site with a very friendly foreman who is happy for us to stay. We enjoy a tasty meal of Korean curry provided by Kim, Spanish sausage from Peré and a nice cup of British tea prepared by me and Kirsty.

Korean Kim

Moonlight (and headtorch) dinner with Kim and Pere

Then we're on the final stretch of the golden road to Samarkand. I had imagined long camel trains, busy road side markets, and all surrounding routes converging on the huge ancient buildings of the city rising up on the horizon.

In reality there was very little that could be called golden about the road, or even silver bronze or tin.

The tail wind has subsided and with it the quality of the road surface has degraded to a cracked and pot holed bone jarrer. To add to the effort needed to keep the bike rolling, there is a slight uphill gradient. Then a storm blows in, soaking us for the first time in several weeks and we have to shelter under a tree during the worst of it.

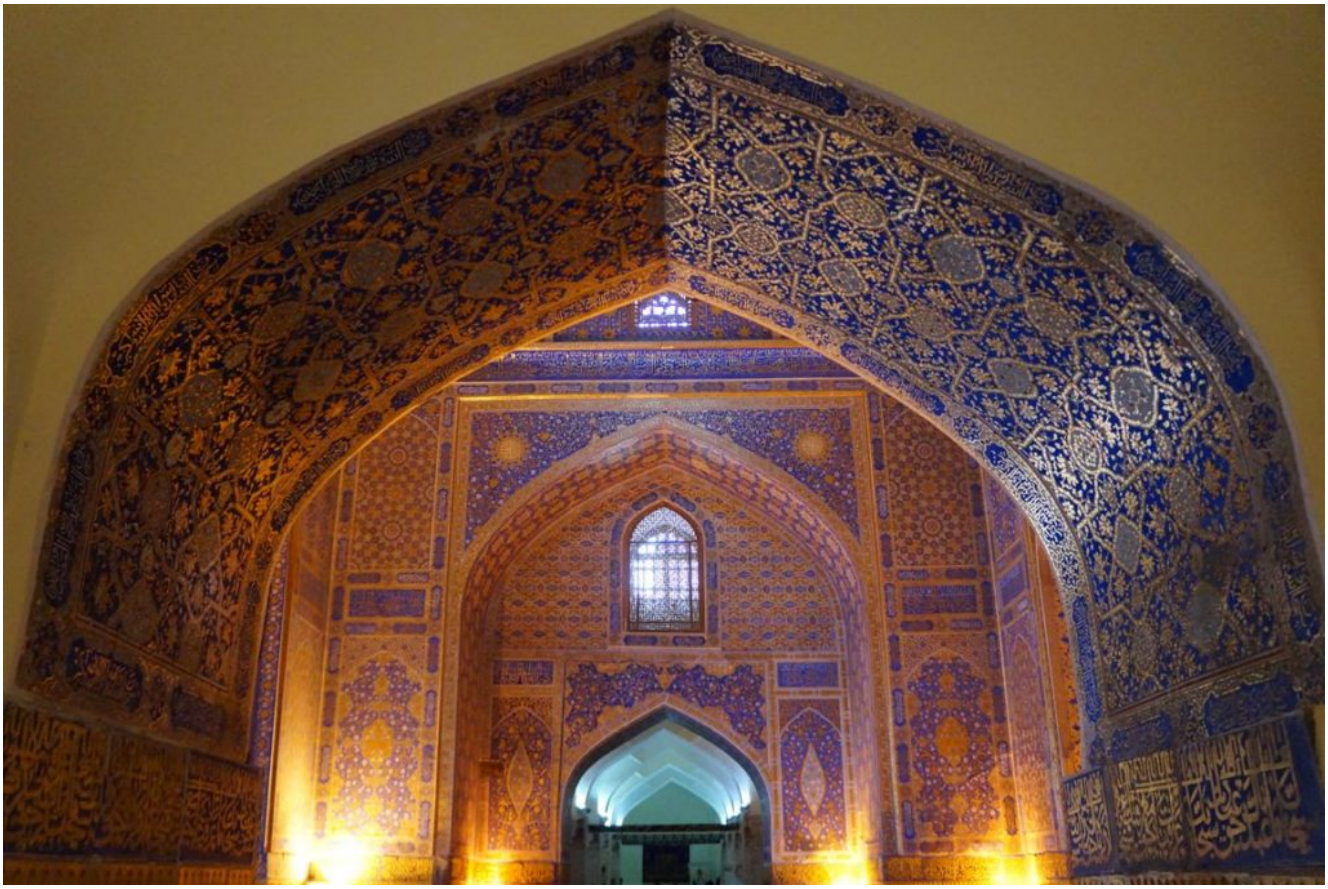
Samarkand is the third largest city in Uzbekistan and at times was the most important town on the Silk Route. We ride through modern, rain soaked suburbs until we finally turn up a slight incline and pull over to take our first glimpse of one of the most impressive set of buildings in Central Asia: The Registan.

Marcus and Kirsty ride to The Registan

Three enormous medrassas arranged around a large courtyard, each of them ornately decorated with hundreds of thousands of tiles and complete with tall minarets and corrugated,

turquoise domes. Although the sky is grey with rain clouds and we're cold and damp it's a sight worth riding 15,000km to see and a moment we'll always remember.

The Registan



The Registan

A local youth group turned up and started drumming away. We were tolkd it was an old fashioned version of a flash mob.

Registan Ceiling

Registan Ceiling

We’re tucked up in bed by the time Peré and Kim arrive at the Hotel Abdu. The tandem friendly roads meant that we’d spun along a bit faster so we’d agreed to meet up again at the end of the day. Unfortunately they’d got caught in the storm and sheltered in a cafe to wait for it to pass, then got lost trying to find the hotel. We’re all glad to have a couple of nights to rest, recuperate and dry out.

As Buckhara was to Khiva, Samarkand is a step up again in terms of scale and magnificence. The mausoleum for the emperor Timur who built a lot of the ancient city is a suitably vast and ornate domed structure with a gate house nearly as tall as the main building itself. The mosque dedicated to his wife Bibi Khanym is one of the largest in Central Asia.

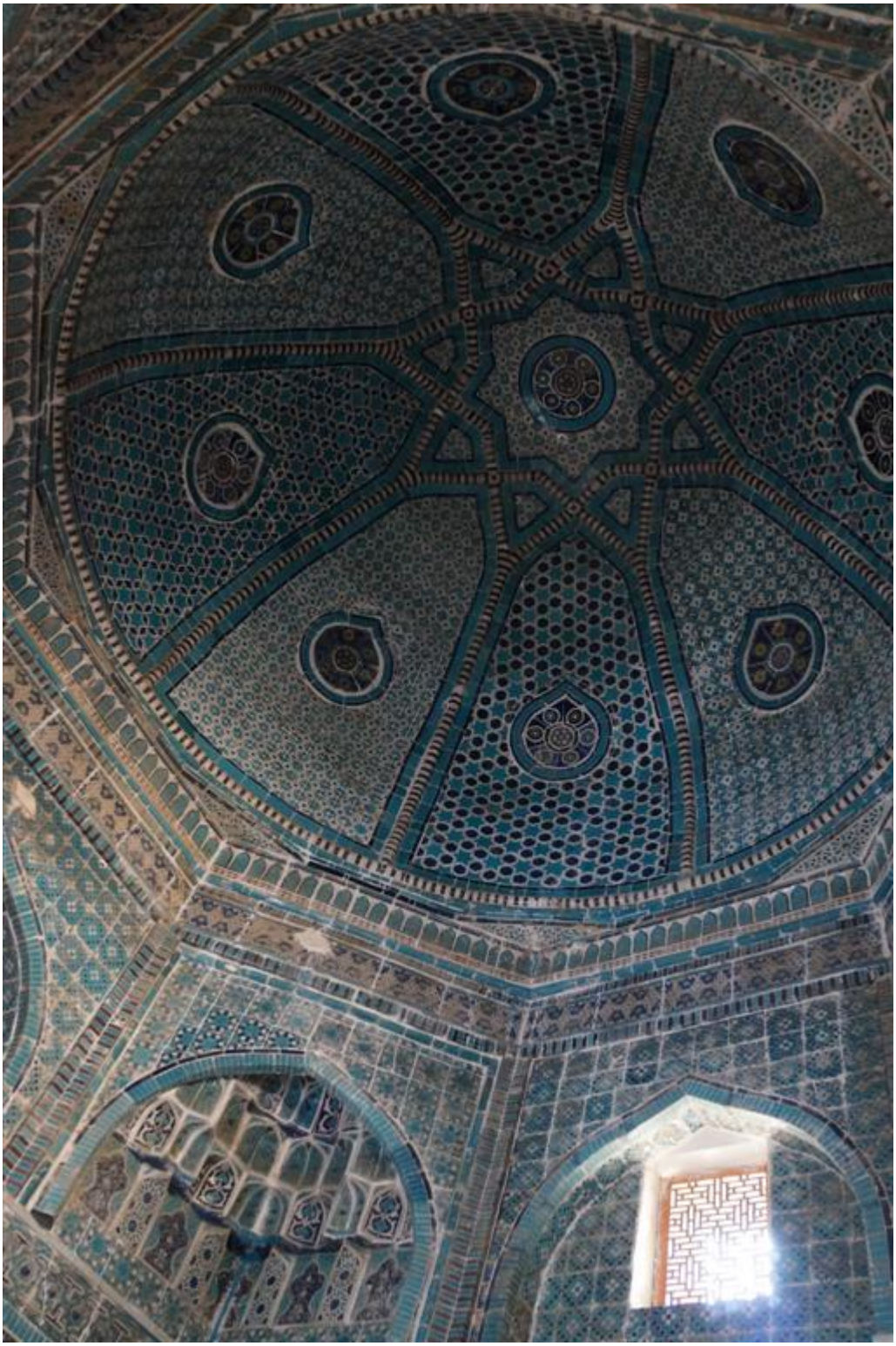
Gur-e Amir Mausoleum

Gur-e Amir Mausoleum

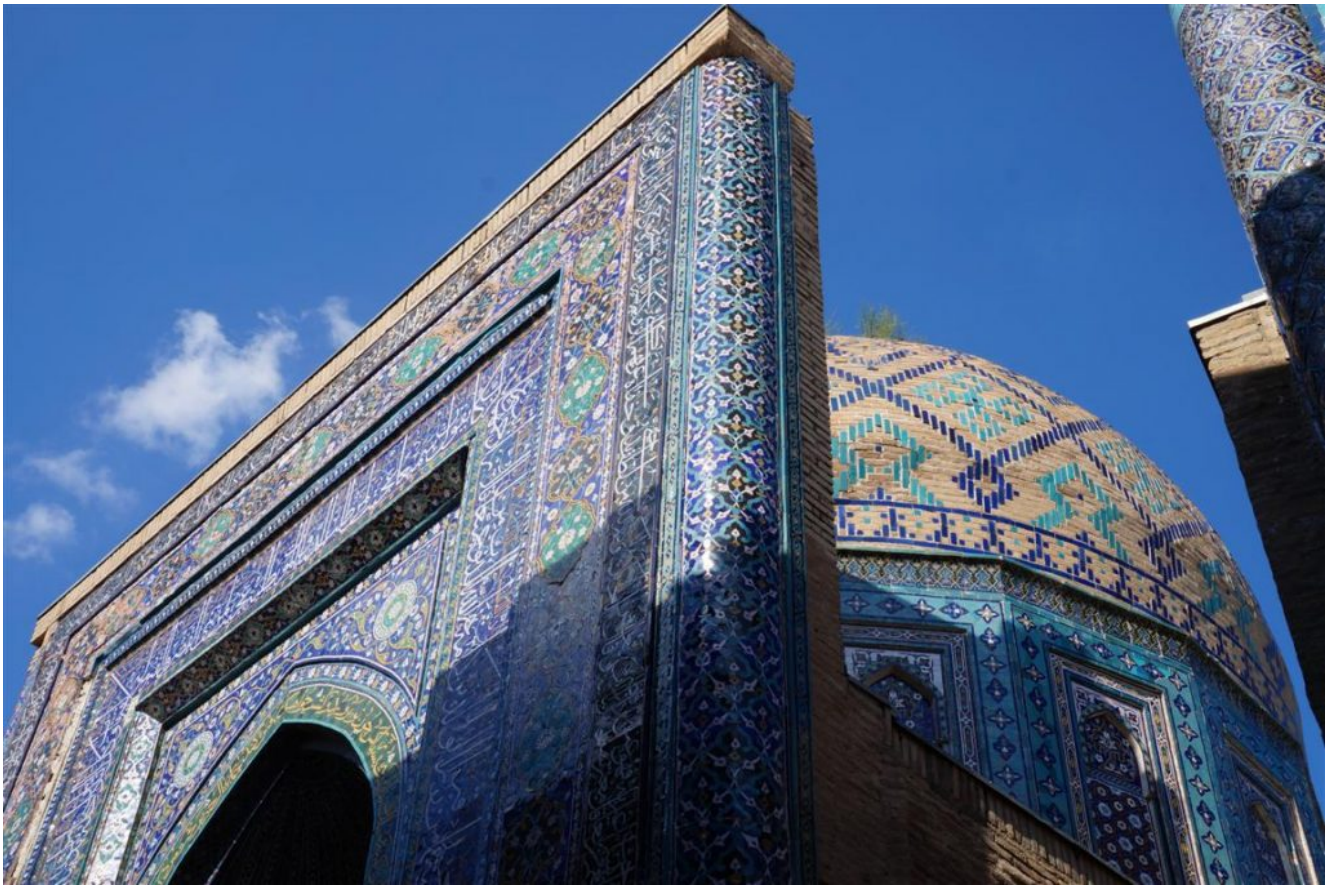
We have to ignore the fact that most of what we are seeing has been restored, renovated and rebuilt several times so very little is original. We also have to swallow hard when we find that tourist prices for the entry fees are a full 17.5 times higher than the local price ($4 instead of 20c).

Shah-i-Zinda necropolis

Shah-i-Zinda necropolis



Shah-i-Zinda necropolis



Shah-i-Zinda necropolis

From here we have five days until our Tajik visa kicks in and a convoluted, 400km route to get to the border as the crossing right next to Samarkand has been closed for a few years now. As far as I’m aware there’s no poem about this section but we’re hoping that the road out of Samarkand is more golden than the road in.

Meeting our first fellow tandem tourers, Alesandro and Stephanie from Italy

A future Khan

Finest quality Uzbek carpets. Could be a good addtition to the tent.