

Samarkand to Dushanbe

written by Marcus | 5 June, 2015



24th May to 5th June 2015

Kirsty was always very proud of her attendance record at her former place of work. In the 14 years she was there the number of days off that she took due to sickness could be counted on one hand. One of those was partly my fault after taking her to a sea food restaurant where she ate a dodgy oyster. We've managed to stay fit and healthy for most of the journey so far with just the occasional sniffle to deal with but there's a certain amount of inevitability to getting sick when travelling for a long time.

Leaving Samarkand we're both feeling good as we pick our way through some small residential streets on gravel roads and emerge on the main highway that leads to Tashkent. Riding a

few km north we arrive at our destination for the morning: the Samarkand Rowing Canal.



Samarkand Rowing Canal

We'd always planned to try and do some rowing during the trip if we got the chance. So when I found out there was an international rowing lake in Samarkand I got in touch with Savara at the Rowing and Canoe Federation of Uzbekistan to see if we could go for a paddle. She was incredibly helpful and organised for us to meet the national team coach and borrow a boat.



Bike and boats

We roll up to the boat house and get warmly greeted by Manucher. It's much like any rowing lake with just over 2000m of water, a small grandstand compete with Olympic rings symbol (don't tell the IOC), and timing booths every 500m. But there are a few things that make it different from Eton Dorney and Holme Pierrepont in England. In the distance a huge range of white, jagged mountains fills the horizon. Cows graze around the 500m marker and a team of workers are cutting the grass on the bank by hand using sickles.



Manucher, Uzbek national team coach

Manucher shows us our boat and blades painted in the Uzbek national colours and we quickly take to the water. Also in common with most rowing lakes there's a strong cross wind which makes the paddling a little trickier. But it's lovely to be out on the water for the first time in 3 years. In fact the last time we were in a double scull I ended up proposing to Kirsty.



He's not paddling on the back



Cows grazing at the 500m mark

After a trip to the end of the lake and back and a few racing 'bursts' we're glad to have stayed upright and dry so decide to cut our losses and head back to dry land.



Some of the Uzbek national squad. And me.

After thanking Manucher and a photo with some of the national squad we're back on the bike and pedaling again but we'll be on the look out for more rowing lakes.

At this point Kirsty admits to be running at about 80%. Perhaps the efforts in the boat took more out of us than we realised? It's hot and hilly which doesn't help so we stop for chai and shade mid afternoon and spot a lake in a few km that would make for a good early camp spot.

In the end we settle for a small river instead of the lake and soon gather a gang of interested children who watch closely while we put up the tent and I carry out some running repairs. Meanwhile the shallow river is busy with cars being driven into it for their weekly car wash.



A critical audience



At the car wash

In the morning we're both under par with grumbling tummies. There's a 1000m climb ahead of us which we tackle slowly, all the time watching for suitable bushes to hide behind, just in case.



The only way is up

A lengthy lunch at a Chaihana is needed along with a snooze. The great thing about the tea beds is that as well as being a place to drink tea, they are also a bed. In most chaihanas there is someone asleep on one. We've also found people sleeping behind the counter in a few shops too.



Stopping for a breather

The hill continues steeply up and we're ready to stop long before we actually find a patch of flat ground near the top. The one benefit of having to dash out of the tent in the middle of the night is that I get a great view of the milky way overhead.



View from the top

We finish the climb in the morning and are rewarded with views opening right out to the mountainous Tajik border. This is a new face to Uzbekistan with huge green hills, woods and meadows. Down we go for several bumpy km relieved not to have to exert much energy other than to squeeze the brakes.



The Uzbek version of the village people suffer from Dyslexia



The only way is down

The temperature is now 41 degrees so we stop for ice cream as soon as we spot a sign with a range of tempting frozen delights on it, only to find the ice cream machine is broken. The disappointment is palpable.



They love their mini vans

Pushing on into Shahrisabz the heat isn't so noticeable while we're moving. The faster we go, the cooler the breeze.

We were warned by an Aussie in Samarkand that Shahrisabz promised a lot but delivered very little. He was right. There are plenty of ancient buildings of interest but the whole town seems to be a building site surrounded by clouds of dust. I'm sure it'll all look lovely when it's finished with some grand landscaping showing off the mosques and monuments but for now a visit to the bazaar for fresh fruit and a swift departure is the order of the day.



Shahrisabz

Another lengthy lunch stop in the shade of a tree and then a last stint in the cooler, late afternoon brings us to a small gulley where we set up camp. During the evening we watch various groups of animals being led down to the stream for a drink. Even the horses can't resist as it's been a hot day for everyone.



Curious shepherd

We try to get away early to get some riding done before the day heats up. Already there is a busy market in full swing a

few hundred metres from our tent. Sheep with enormously fat bottoms overhanging their back legs are being loaded into ladas and mini vans and onto the back of motorbikes. The bigger the bottom the better as it provides more fat for the Lagman/plov/manti/samsa. These animals are the J-Los of the ovine world.



They love big butts...

We pass wheat fields and groups of waving, whistling workers. There's almost a constant barrage of 'Atkhuda?', Russian for 'Where are you from?' from everyone we meet. After telling them we're from 'Anglia' they seem satisfied and wander off.



‘Atkuda?’



The road rises and falls and rises some more. The temperature also rises to 42 degrees and it's a very dry heat leaving our tongues as dry as Gandhi's flip flop.

The now routine and necessary afternoon stop finds us next to a stream under a tree. Some children creep out and after the inevitable 'Atkuda?' practice their English on us which mostly involves listing types of fruit. We mime the type of fruit in response to show that we understand, much to their amusement.



Is it a banana?

One of the parents then invites us in and we're fed a type of delicious milky cheese with tomatoes and sent away with fresh

bread.

A steady climb ends the day and we're joined by a friendly dog who enjoys the view down into a valley with us. He's happy to finish off some stale bread that we'd been carrying for a few days. Presumably this doesn't count as throwing it away?

The climb continues through a small dusty village with a police check point on the far side. We've passed several of these all through Uzbekistan and have always just been waved straight through without stopping. This time though we're told in no uncertain terms to stop and present our passports.



We're given the all clear then it's brakes off, into the big ring for the rewarding descent. It's a rocky, red landscape with a few patches of green tucked into the sharp ridge lines. There are huge slabs lent against each other like a collapsed set of dominos.

At the bottom the cliffs close in on us, the road gets rough and we arrive at another police checkpoint. There's lots of whistling and friendly, perhaps even frantic, waving as we ride on through past the queue of parked cars. They really do seem pleased to see us here.

I stop a couple of hundred metres further down the road to take a photo of an interesting junction and a few seconds later a car skids to a halt alongside. A policeman jumps out and demands to see our passports. We're then made to ride back up to the checkpoint so they can write our name in what looks like a large school exercise book. I suppose this gives the impression of the authorities knowing where people are throughout the country. There is also a registration system that asks you to collect a stamped receipt for each night a visitor is in country. Fine if you stay in hotels every night but difficult if your accommodation is a tent. We have four receipts for over 3 weeks in the country which causes a lot of shaking of heads and looks of puzzlement. We shrug our shoulders and indicate that that's all we have, knowing from other people's experience that this rule is rarely enforced, if ever. Reluctantly they let us go.

So back to that interesting junction we roll. Turning right would take us onto the road to Mazar-I-Sharif and onwards to Kabul. An interesting prospect if it wasn't for the fact that we don't have a Afghan visas. Or a pair of kevlar vests. We turn left instead to continue on towards the safety of Tajikistan.



Turn right for Afghanistan



Or left for Tajikistan



After lunch we endure another very long, hot climb with a bumpy decent on the other side so again no reward for our efforts as I'm hard on the brakes all the way down. While pootling through Baysun an Irish voice calls out to us and another cycle tourist pulls alongside. "You must be Marcus and Kirsty!". Our reputation precedes us as this is Will who had been riding with Rob and Josh up until a few days ago and had obviously been tipped off that we were on the road ahead of him. He's staying the night here but we want to go a bit further so we agree to try and meet the next day and ride to the border together.

We'd both been feeling much better for the last few days but the following morning I wake with stomach pains. It eases off once we start riding though so hopefully just a short lived bug from a dodgy ice cream, or the water from a hose or the unmarked bottle of water i'd drunk.



A 7.5 pence ice cream





We have a 15km head start on Will and enjoy dropping down into a wonderful valley with a stream cutting deep into the valley floor. There's a timeless view of a shepherd in a traditional long coat tending to his flock of lardy sheep. Then it's up and up before a smooth long descent along a ridge with rolling brown hills on either side. It's nice to be able to let the bike go for once as the road surface is very good.



It looked like we were arriving into a flat plain but after stopping for juice and biscuits and to soak our heads under a cold tap we find its actual very lumpy. A series of short, sharp climbs with just as steep a drop on the other side, sometimes rough and unsurfaced get us working up a sweat. It's over 40 degrees again.

Lunch with our feet in a stream is a refreshing relief and I'm about to lie down in it when a small snake pokes it's head above the water, takes one look at us and then disappears. Time to get moving again. But not before a few passersby have given us bread and biscuits.

We don't get far as we're distracted by some plum trees and stop to pick some. At the same time a car pulls up to us and a man we recognised as one of the bread and biscuit donors climbs out with his 14 year old daughter. She explains that she is at the top of her English class and wants to practice.

She also wants an English pen friend so we hand her our email address but we're still waiting to hear from her.

Will finally catches us as we're pulled over once more to receive an offer of chai. The tiny roadside stall sells an eclectic mix of goods ranging from individual cigarettes, to bars of soap, noodles and fizzy drinks.

The two bikes move quickly into Denow where we pick up supplies then navigate our way straight out again. The stomach cramps have returned and Will admits he's not 100% either so we begin the search for somewhere to hide the tents.



Big yellow wasp

The options are very sparse as it's all quite built up but we settle for some rough ground next to a derelict building. Not very salubrious as it also seems to be the village tip but desperate cycle tourists can't be too picky. We're all a bit despondent as it's not the memorable last night in Uzbekistan

we'd hoped for.

But before we can pitch the 'palatcas' we're saved from a night on the dump by our neighbours from across the road. It appears to be some sort of oil processing depot and they proudly show us their laboratory and bottling shed. Will has a reasonable grasp of Russian having studied it for a few months before starting the trip (putting us to shame) so he's able to convey our respective stories as well as our needs.

The owner is a Mr Choiyny who happens to be in Germany at the moment so we're offered his cosy room for the night. In case we're in any doubt that he won't mind a phone is presented with Mr Choiyny on the other end. In a combination of German and Russian Will is given the message that we are more than welcome and that his staff will look after us.



A feast was laid out for us

A table is brought out followed by several courses of

delicious food. Both Will and I have perked up again so manage to gratefully tuck in. It's a lovely, restful evening and just what we needed to recuperate before the last stint to the border thanks to Mr Choiny and his staff.



Dinner at the oil depot with Will

Things are not quite as pleasant in the morning though. Will had decided to pitch his tent on the hard standing and we find him lying on a piece of carpet outside it looking very much worse for wear. He'd had a rough night with an upset stomach and is in no fit state to ride that day. We explain to the oil staff that he needs to sleep and ask if he can stay but to our surprise the answer is "no, clear off". It's a complete turnaround after the generosity of the night before. We can only assume that this is due to a fear of being caught by the authorities. It's actually forbidden for tourists to be given accommodation unless in a licenced hotel or guest house. This is one of the reasons they have the registration process. The

nights in Pamela's and Moyrags homes and also the night here at the oil terminal are actually illegal.



Saying goodbye to/being kicked out by the oil workers

Despite this we'd hoped that Will could have been concealed for one day but instead we have to help him pack and are told there's a guest house in the next town, just 2 or 3 km away.

4.5 km later we arrive having towed Will as best we can. We're immediately told there is no guest house which comes as a blow. Our next move is to ask at the nearest Chaihana for some sleeping space and after some discussion with the proprietress a door is opened in a small shed and Will is installed on the mattress inside. We stock him up with water and crisps and he insists we carry on without him. All being well we'll see him again in Dushanbe the day after.

The run up to the border takes us closer to the huge mountains we'd started seeing since leaving Samarkand. We stop to pick

wild cherries by the road side and then again to let a huge heard of horses come galloping along the road.



Cherry picking



Horse herding



Horse herding

We've now ridden the entire length of Uzbekistan and it's been quite a journey full of colourful characters, spontaneous generosity, interesting history and wonderful landscapes. But mostly desert.

Standing in the customs office we're a bit nervous as we don't have the declaration form that was supposed to have been given to us on entry (we managed to skip that on the way in from Kazakhstan). Their main concern is movement of foreign currency so we declare that we have \$25 and there doesn't seem to be a problem. However they then start a search of our panniers diving deeper and deeper into the murky depths, opening tins and rummaging through our medical kit. When the customs officer reaches the oily tools and spares section she rapidly loses interest and tells us to repack as we're free to go. But not before a quick body check. For the second time in my life I'm told I have 'very strong legs' after a squeeze by

a customs officer. I'm not sure whether to be flattered or disturbed.

At the passport control there's more shaking of heads at our lack of hotel registration slips but we get the ink on the page and push off in the direction of the Tajik border control. Luckily the \$200 concealed about Kristy's person was not found.

Up a hill (we'd better get used to this) we quickly meet the Tajik guards, fill in a form with no apparent purpose and have our temperatures taken as a cursory health check. Given the all clear we're released into Country #29: Tajikistan.

The smooth processing at the border is followed by a smooth road all the way into Dushanbe, the capital and also the Tajik word for Monday. This must cause some confusion.

-When are you going to Dushanbe?

-Dushanbe.

-Yes but when.

-Oh, I'm going to Dushanbe on Dushanbe.

-??

Another Warmshowers legend is waiting for us in the form of Véro. There can't be a single cyclist travelling through Tajikistan who doesn't pitch their tent in her garden and when we arrive there are another 8 people staying from Hungary, Belgium, Germany, America, France and Taunton. Véro moved here from France 2 years ago to work for the EU and has since opened her house as a peaceful refuge in the middle of a busy city.

We need a few days to compose ourselves for the next leg of the trip as it's going to be a tough one. For the flattest part of the Kyzyl Kym desert we climbed just 1,200m over the course of 1,200km. Up ahead we have the Pamir highway with 20,000m to climb over a 1,200km distance and some very high altitude passes.

It's not as if I'm in a hurry to go anywhere anyway as my stomach is still complaining about something I put into it. Everyone in the house who has arrived from Uzbekistan has had similar troubles so it seems like a standard parting gift.



Vero and her guests

We have a couple of tasks to do while we stay in the city, the most important of which is to apply for a permit to enter the Badakshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) that encompasses the Pamirs. We'd had a fright in Khiva when we'd been told by some other cyclists that permits were no longer being issued. Apparently the pesky Taliban had been trying to ruin things for everyone by coming too close to the Afghan/Tajik border so the Tajik government didn't want tourists going that way. Luckily they've now been pushed south so it's deemed safe again and permits are available again. It takes a day and 20 somani (£2) to sort out the vital slip of paper to allow us to get into the mountains.

On one evening we're invited to join a party at the home of some Americans. They are US Special Forces celebrating a changing of the guard as one group leaves and another arrives to take over. We get an interesting insight into their work training Tajik soldiers (all highly classified) but quickly the party degenerates into a cross between American Pie and Team America with a highly realistic wrestling match towards the end. Their work over here has been slightly tarnished with the recent defection of the Tajik head of police to ISIS, taking with him a lot of the training and information given to him by the US Special Forces. Let's hope the new lot have more luck.

Will did arrive the day after us after a harrowing experience in the Chaihana. In the traditions of his home town here's a Limerick to tell the story:

*There was a young man called Will
Who while cycling felt really quite ill
At a tea house he rested
And his composure was tested
When he was offered much more than the bill.*

He was even more glad to reach the safety of Véro's garden than most.

After four days in the tranquil surroundings of Véro's garden (apart from the screeching peacocks from the adjacent presidential palace and Véros talkative, whistling parrot) I'm feeling 90% well which is enough for me to want to get going.

It would have been easy to stay longer (the record is one month) but on a sunny Friday afternoon everything returns to it's rightful place in our panniers and we head out onto the road again. Hopefully we won't have too many more off-days to detract from our attendance record.

Nukus to Samarkand

written by Marcus | 5 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 patterned 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 Indiana 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

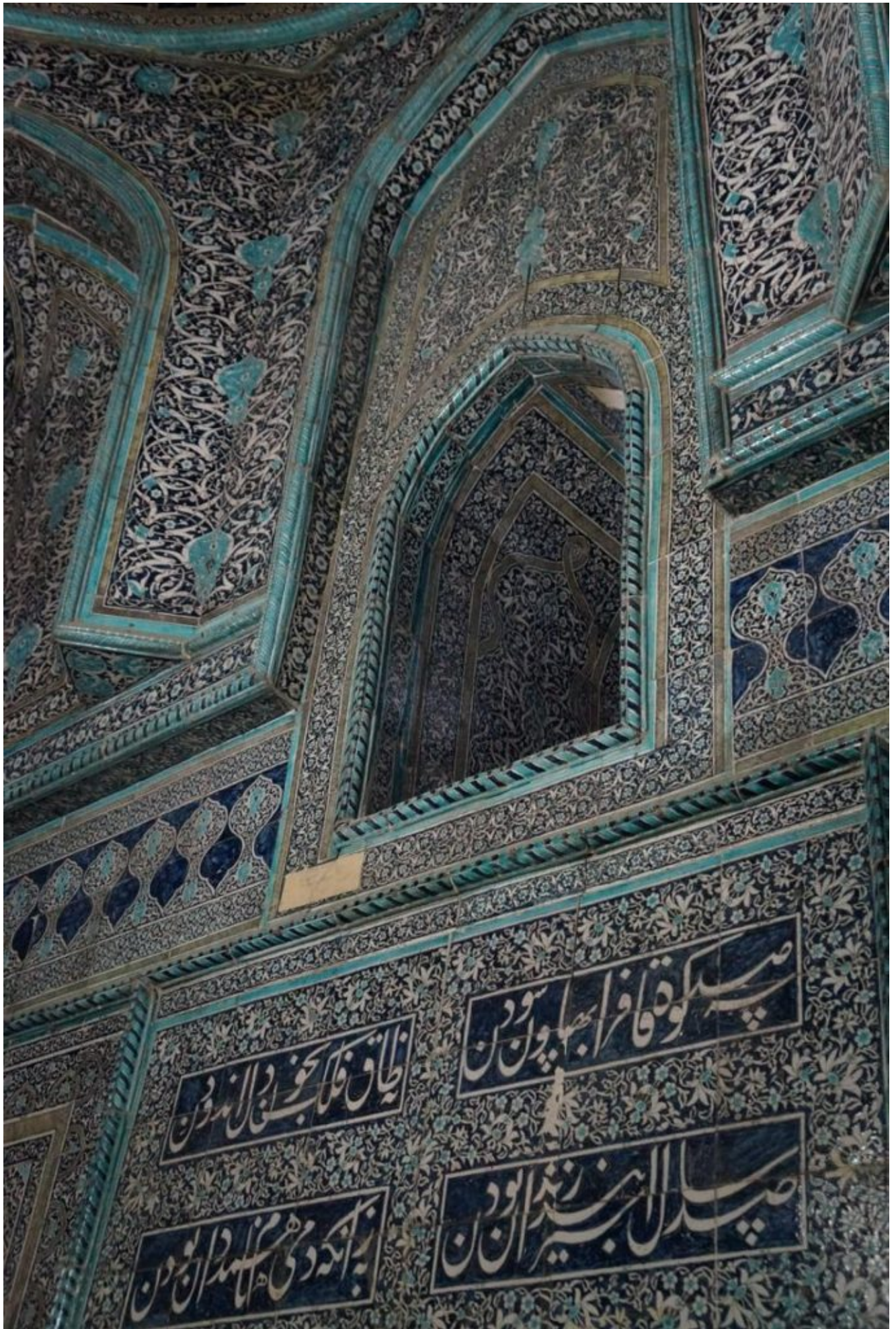




Traditional dancing in Khiva







سپه کو قافرا به پارس
نطاق فلک بخون دل ندون

سیدالبنیادین
ز انکه دمی سها دین

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 than 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



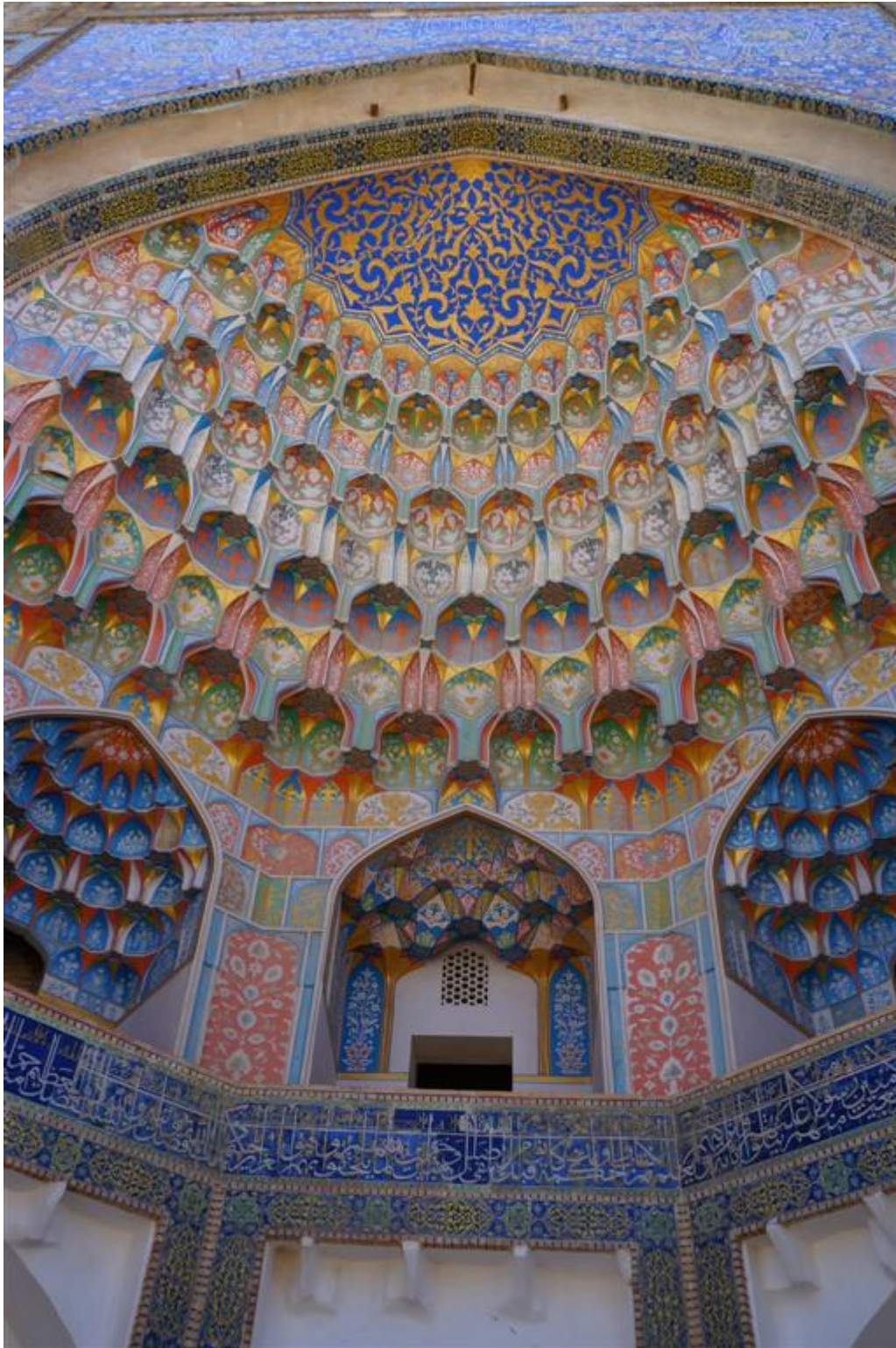
4 days after leaving Khiva we arrive at our next Silk Road town: Bukhara. This is a popular traveler's destination so we meet several back packers, other cyclists and a family from France travelling to Malasia by camper van with 3 small children. The conversation between the different types of traveller 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 punishment was still

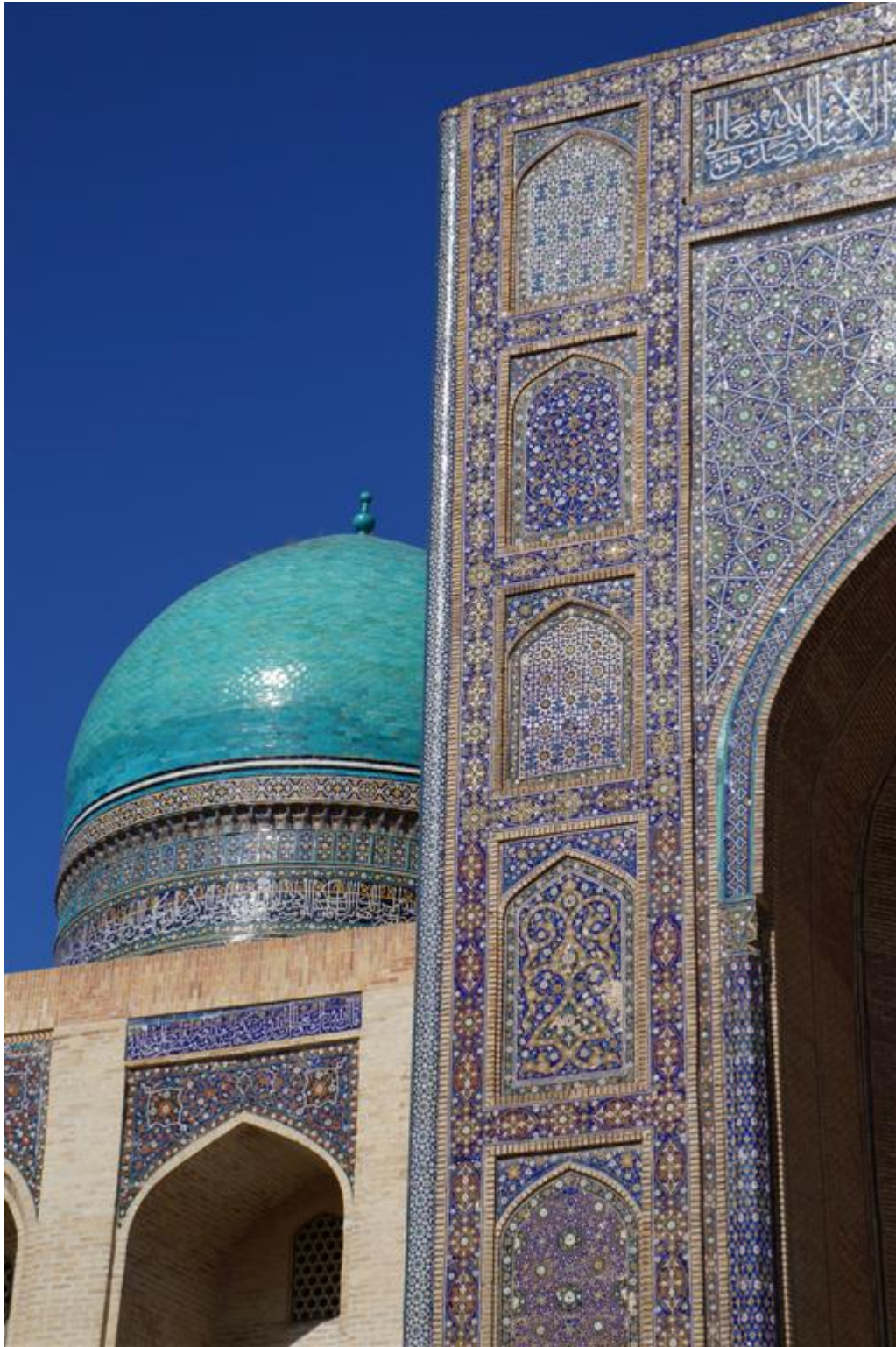
taking place up until the 1920s.



Kalyan Minaret



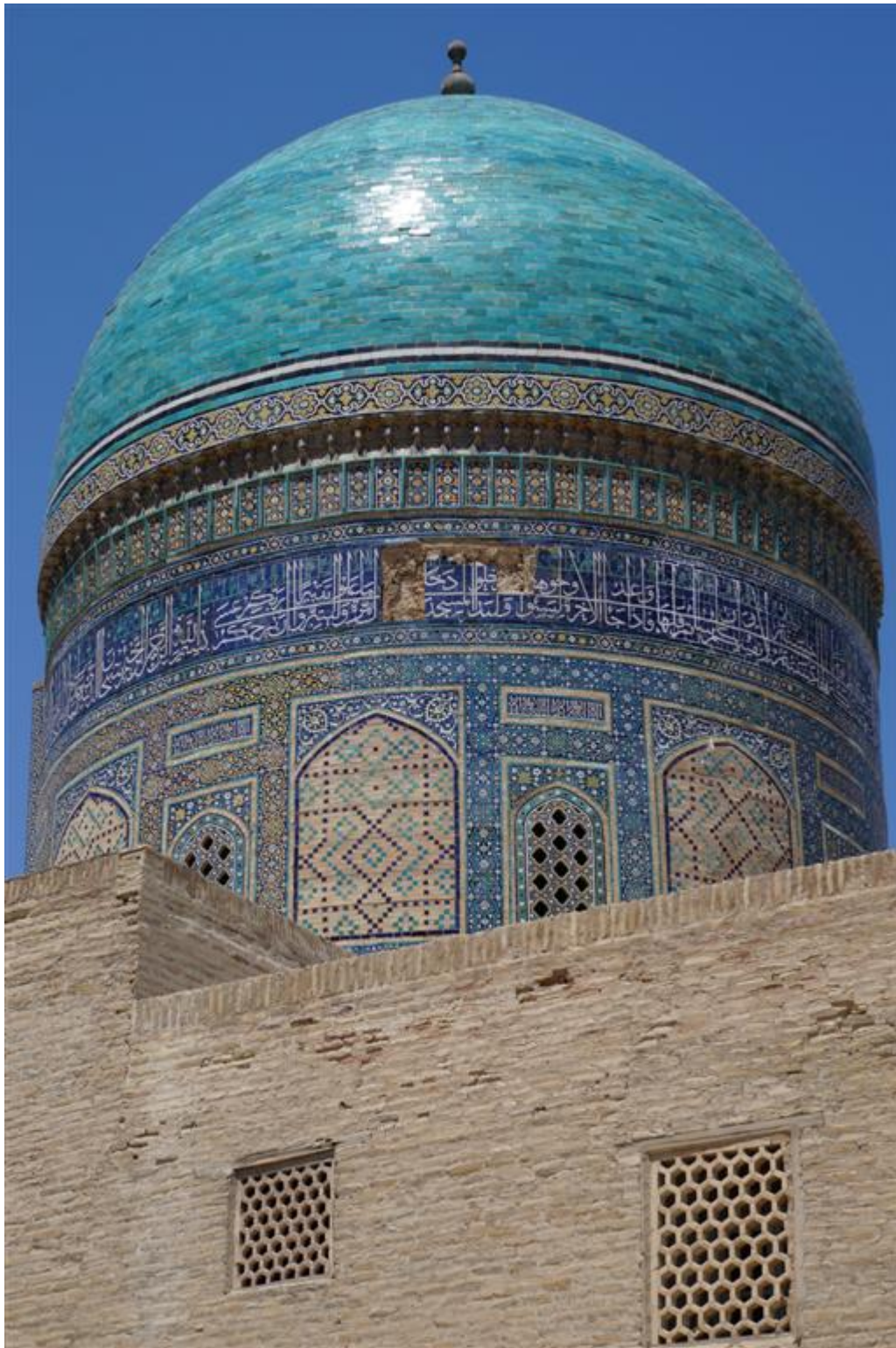








Char Minor





Friday prayers

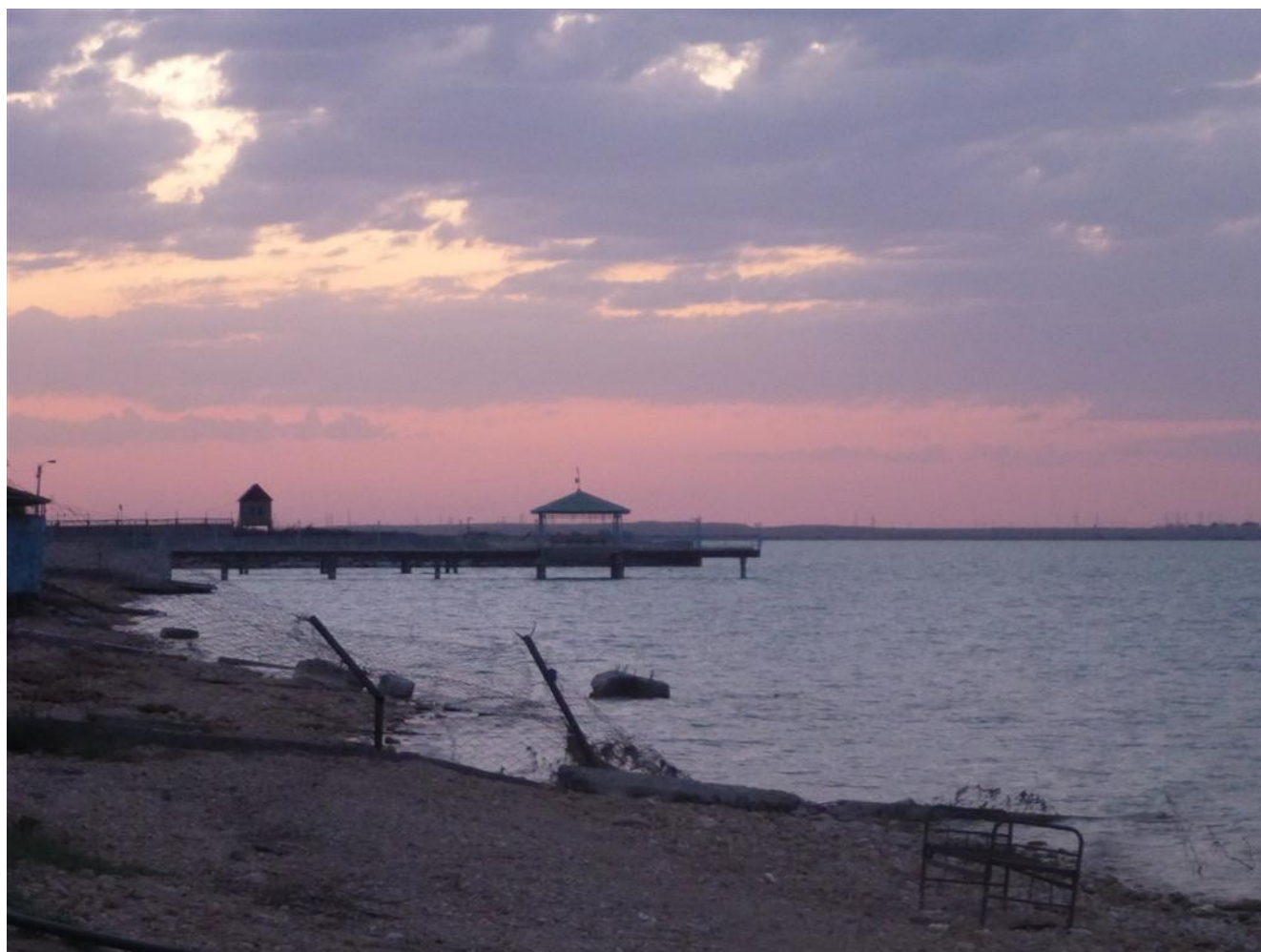


Samanid mausoleum (C9-10) – also saved from Ghengis Khan as it was buried under sand.

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



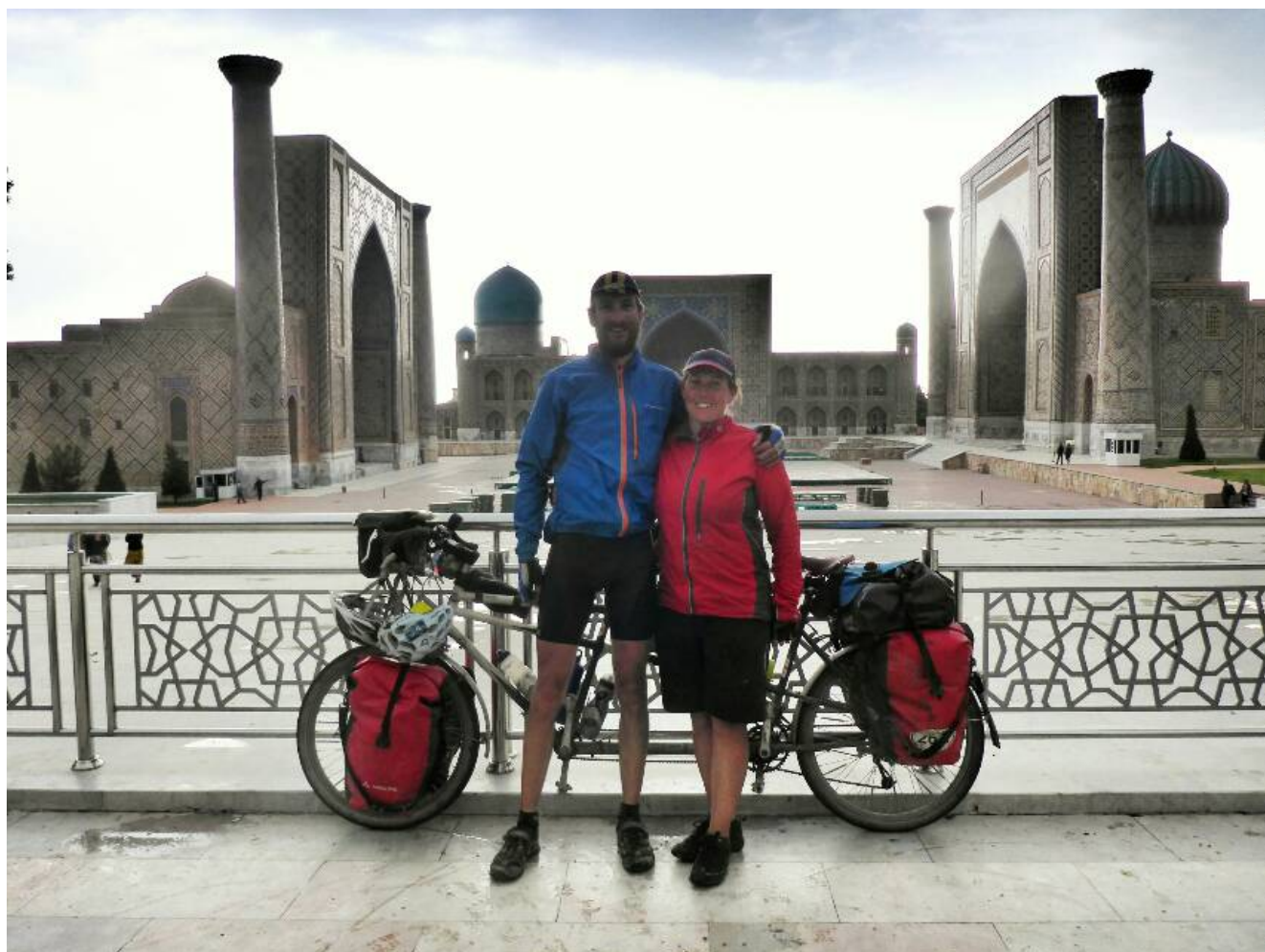
Moonlight (and headtorch) dinner with Kim and Pere

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









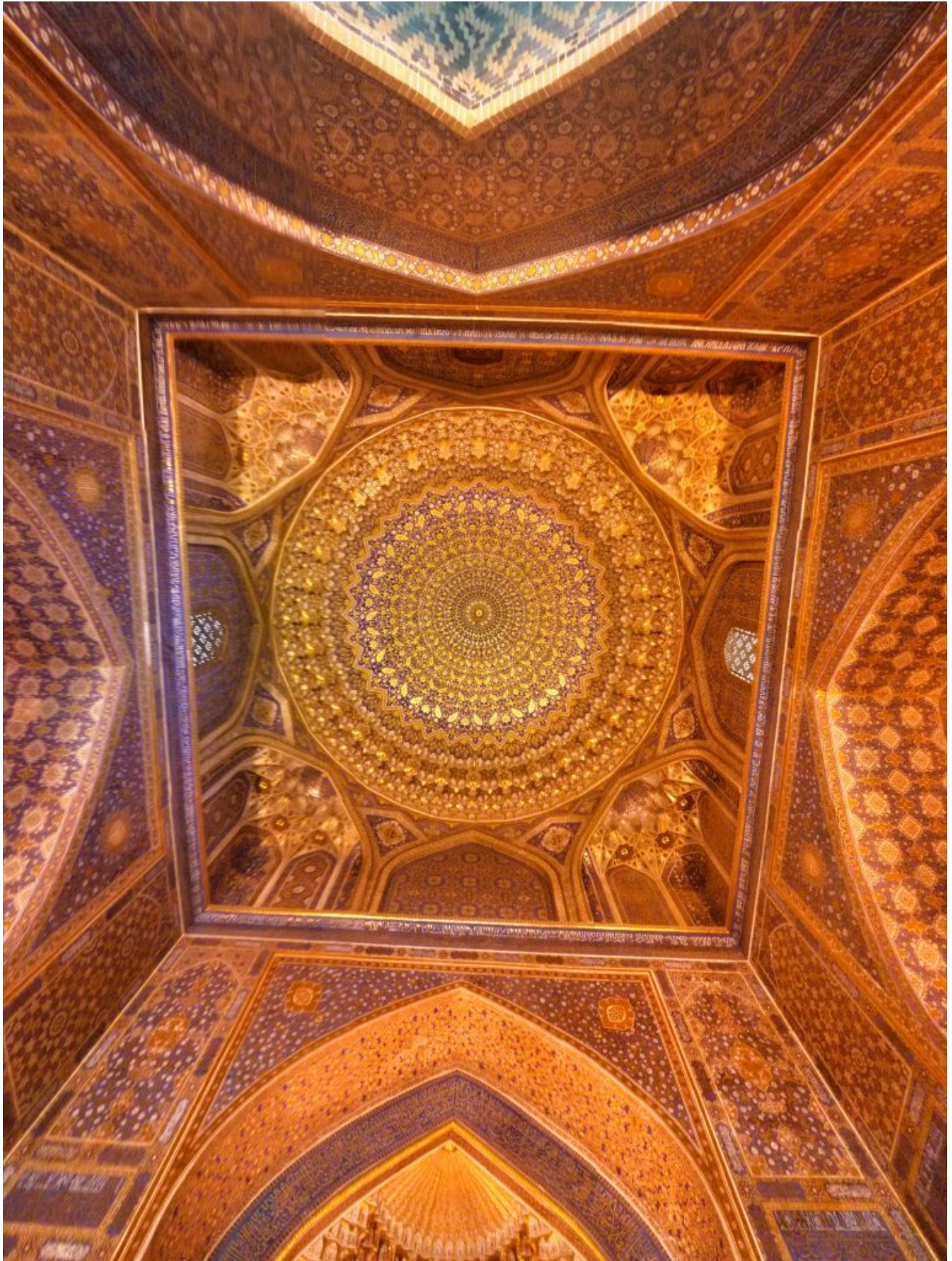
The Registan



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

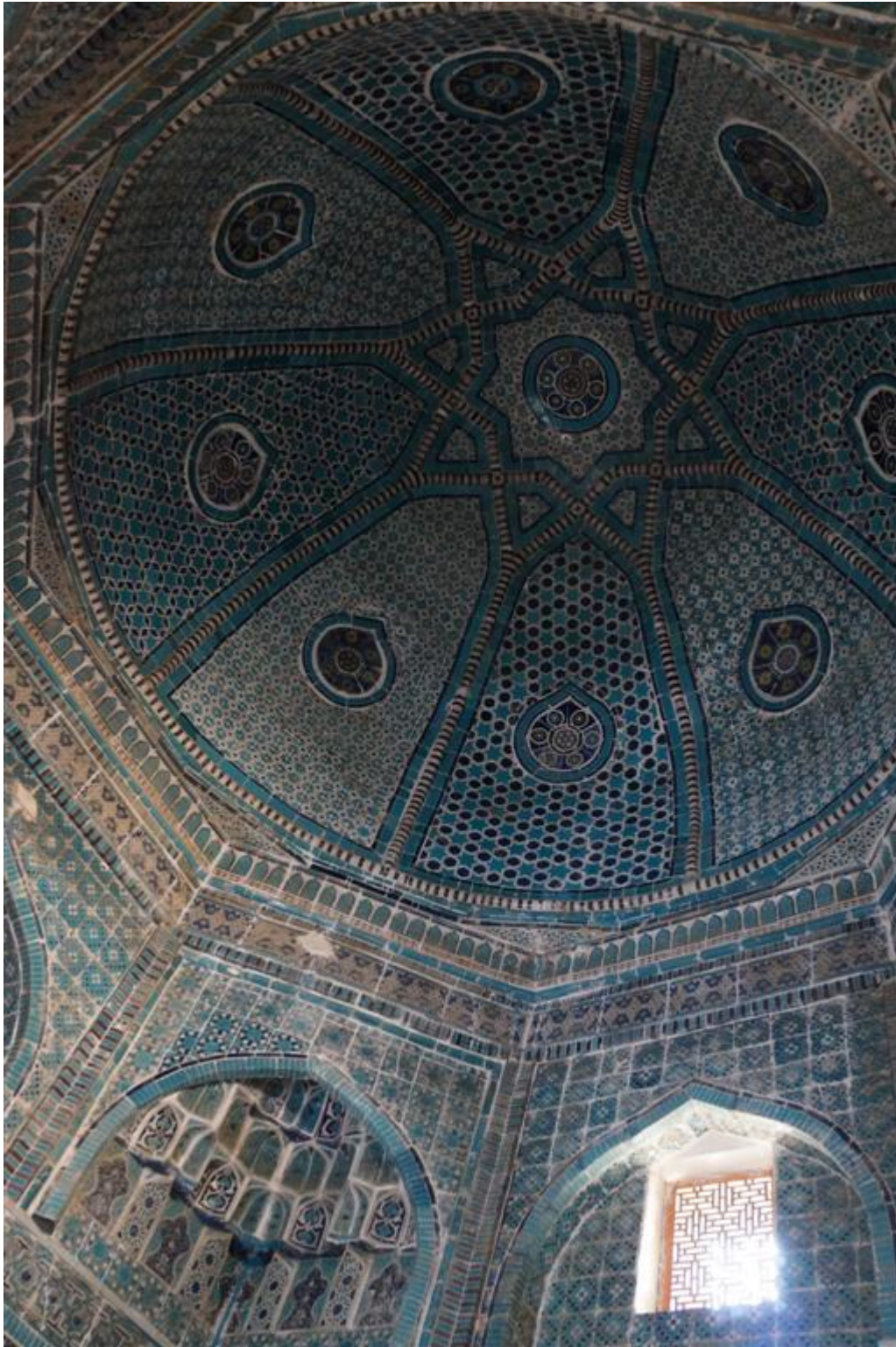
We have to ignore the fact that most of what we are seeing has been restored, renovated and rebuilt several times so very little is original. We also have to swallow hard when we find that tourist prices for the entry fees are a full 17.5 times higher than the local price (\$4 instead of 20c).



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 addition to the tent.