

Central Asia



Tadzhikistan, Uzbekistan & Turkmenistan

October 2012



Dushanbe, Tadzhikistan

This is my first visit to Dushanbe (formerly known as Stalinabad) and Tadzhikistan. I arrive from Istanbul at the ungodly time of 04:00 in the middle of the night (morning). Not sure which better describes this. Strangely enough there are more flights from Europe arriving at the same time which makes the line through immigration even longer.

I was picked-up and transferred to the hotel where I met up with my club-100 fellow travelers whom had already been doing Kazakhstan as well as Kirgizstan. I did not have time for all five Central Asian countries at the time since working, so I decided to join the group half-way through. I joined them for breakfast and then we set-off to see the city of Dushanbe. The city is quite green and lush with many of the streets lined with trees. We looked at the architecture and the customary monuments, but honestly – nothing to get excited over or to write home about.

The Tadziks arrived originally from Persia. With them they brought their language, culture and traditions. This while the other Central Asian countries are Turk-based. The women here are mostly dressed traditionally in quite colorful clothes, which reminds me of Pakistan or northern India.

In Dushanbe we stayed at the soviet built and inspired hotel The Poytakht. Functional, but again very dull construction. The food we tried here at the restaurant which was chosen was nothing special either. The restaurant was one of those where they bring foreign tourists so, we were also entertained during the dinner by a couple of belly-dancing ladies.





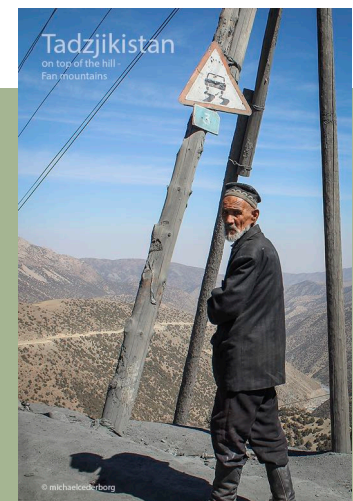
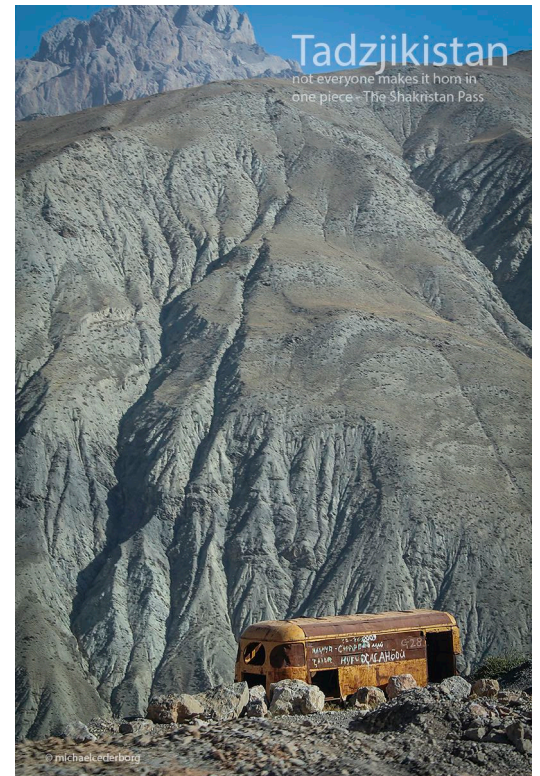
Crossing the Fann Mountains

From Dushanbe our real journey now begins. We leave in a convoy of three 4-wheel drive jeeps, climbing up through **the Fann mountains** and the spectacular **Shakhristan pass at 3300 meters height**. The serpentine road gets worse and worse the further we climb and our drives far too fast on these roads. Adding to this also the oncoming vehicles are speeding coming down the mountain.

On more than one occasion the road is so narrow, that there is not enough space for two cars. When you look down the slopes of the mountain, one can see many car wrecks dotted further down. The sky is blue and the air is thin and clear up here. There are surprisingly many people also walking along the roadsides. Up at the top we stop and marvel at the view in all directions. Here we also meet two American cyclist who are on a quest to cross all of Central Asia on mountain bikes. They started their journey in Singapore and are aiming to finish up in Gibraltar. That quite an achievement.

After having reached the top it is now time for descending again and **the small village of Istravshan**, one of the oldest cities (2500 years old) in the region. This town has served as a resting place and trade center for centuries with the caravans coming through this way when the Silk Road still served an important purpose and nave in the trade routes. **We thereafter reach Khojand** (previously known as Leninabad) just before the border crossing into Uzbekistan.

We stopped also to taste and purchase some of the fruits and nuts which were being sold along the way. This is political disputed and very unstable areas with Military patrolling from both sides. Very beautiful and tranquil landscape. To travel through





Uzbekistan
Older Uzbeki women outside
the Ulughbek Observatory
© michaelcederberg



Uzbekistan
At a local restaurant in Samarkand
© michaelcederberg

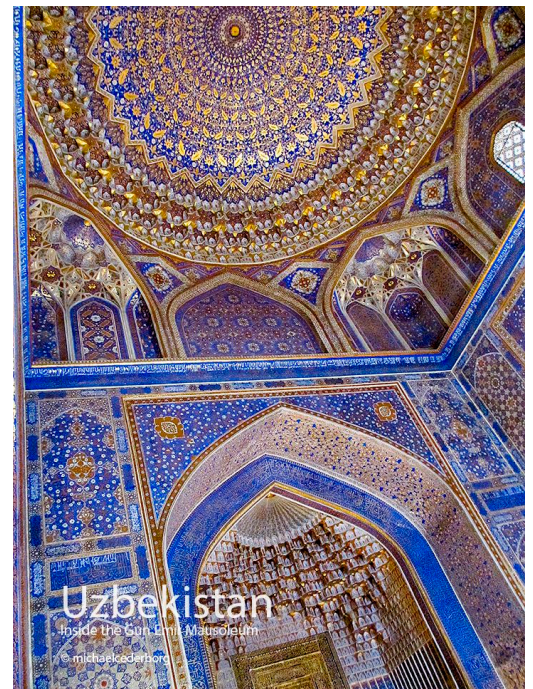
Samarkand

After a couple of nights stopping over in Tashkent, where we ate well and enjoyed the market place and a few other sights, it was time to make our way towards Samarkand. We stayed at the very nice Tashkent Palace in the centre of town with good restaurants just outside at the nearby square. Few cities are so intimately associated with legends and history quite like Samarkand. It is as old as Rome, Athens, Babylon with over 2500 years on its neck.

We stop along the way to Samarkand to visit an old caravanserai and some very old water reservoirs. These were of course essential and often used by the by-passing caravans on this main silk route with their cargo to be traded. We also pass by miles upon miles with cotton fields. Here I just have to stop and take some photos. There are also many stalls selling vegetables, fruits and other products along the road.

We have two full days and two nights in this amazing town of Samarkand. We get to see the city, its old bazars, temples, cemeteries etc. Some of the temples which have made Samarkand famous include; Ulughbeks observatorium, the necropolis Shah-I-Zinda, Hazrat Hyzr mosque and Guri Amir Mosque where Timor Lenk is buried. There are many very nice boutiques hotels (converted old merchant houses) which can be stayed at. We stayed here at Hotel Malika Samarkand which was nothing special.

I also had a night out with a person I was referred to before going. He, a manager of a Museum took me around to see some sights which are off the normal visiting route. He also invited me to his home where he and his wife had made dinner. This made the stay all the more interesting and worthwhile.



Uzbekistan
inside the Gur-i-Amir Mausoleum
© michaelcederberg



Uzbekistan
We have found Talla-Sonaras
money paid for local operator



Uzbekistan
Beautifully dressed in local costume
© michaelcederberg



Uzbekistan
The Registan mosque and square
in Samarkand
© michaelcederberg

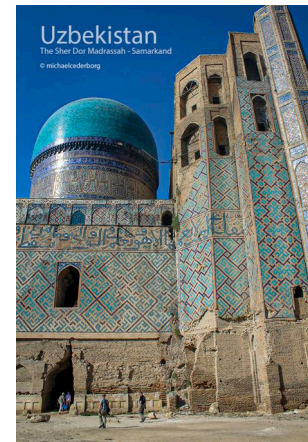
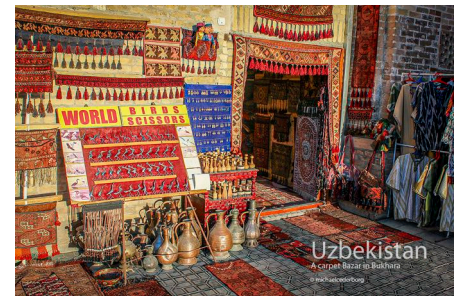


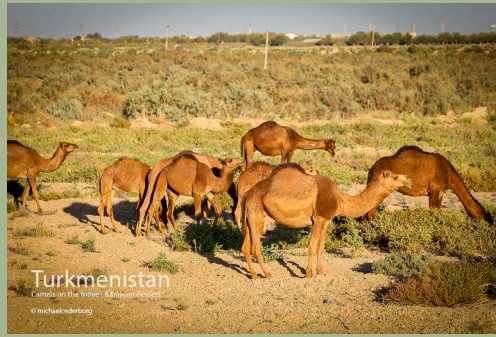
Bukhara

After Samarkand we head for **Bukhara**, another five hours on Uzbek country roads. **In Bukhara we check in to a lovely Arabic inspired boutique hotel – Amelia.** It is an old merchant house which has been converted into a lovely hotel. Bukhara, just like Samarkand, is of course is a UNESCO world heritage site since long. We make a stop to the **Lyabi-Hauz central plaza** with lovely old buildings and many small outdoor restaurants. We walk through the old city centre and **visit a few very old madrassas such as Nadir Divanbegi and the column minaret and mosque bearing the same name.**

The city of Bukhara is also famous for its carpet making as well as ceramics. The carpet shops are everywhere to be seen. You can also by flavoured tea, spices and lovely silk scarves. I decide to purchase ceramics, and am pleased to say that I am still using these pieces in my summer house back home in Sweden.

Another fellow traveller and I decide to try out the old and traditional bathhouse with a massage. This is an over 500-year-old institution still used today. **The Bozori Kord Hammam** as it is called. Is the oldest hammam in central Asia still in use. A 2-hour treatment makes you feel like a whole new person.



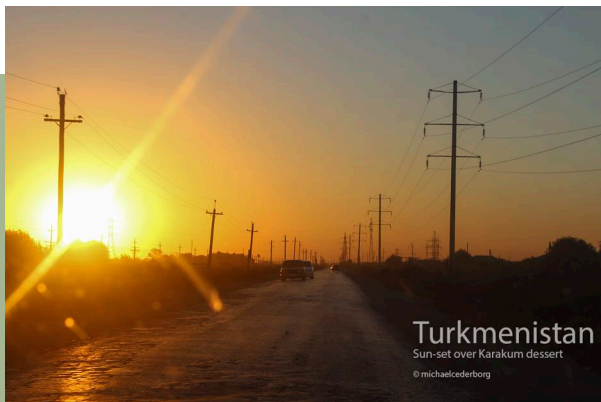


Through Karakum dessert

The trip from Bukhara and the Turkmenian border did take a couple of hours to maneuver, but went better than expected. A lot of bureaucracy and papers checked, but we were let into Turkmenistan. We had to walk and in parts use a small minibus in the no-man's land between the two countries. It is exceedingly difficult to get visa for Turkmenistan at this time and **only some 6-8.000 people visits the country each year**. That is only some 20 people per day. I suspect most of these do come through Ashgabat and the airport and not overland. No wonder it is called the North Korea of Central Asia.

The former president Nijazov created an enormous personal cult around himself and covered a lot of buildings with Carrara marble from Italy. He posted portraits of himself everywhere and even named the weekdays after himself and his family members. The new president has cleaned up the most excessive things he introduced, but has now instead – of course – started putting up portraits of himself all around the cities in the country. The story will continue no doubt.

Our first part of the Turkmenistan journey goes some 8 hours through the Karakum dessert from north to south. Here the landscape is very barren with mostly gravel and sand. Nothing seems to grow out here. We are met by the occasional trucks traveling north with cargo. On one occasion a lorry managed to lose control of the vehicle and skidded off the road. We see also the occasional camel caravans and also camels gracing further south, where there is something to eat.





The Queen of the World

Merv “The Queen of the World” was once in the same league as the cities of Damascus, Cairo and Bagdad in the Islamic world. In the south end of the Karakum dessert we are checked in to Hotel Day Anc just outside the center of Mary.

The following morning, rested after the long journey the day before trough the dessert, we went to the long-awaited visit to Merv. **Merv is listed as a UNESCO world heritage site** where a group of archeologists have recently been excavating new areas of the old site. **The most interesting was the Kyz kala fort (picture top center).**

The big event of the day was the unplanned stop at **the weekly market** not far from Merv. Here we saw all the people who had travelled from near and far to sell or buy anything from goats, camels to cattle. This was really genuine with no tourists in eyesight. We were welcomed and they seemed genuinely interested in us visiting their market. I could take as many pictures as I wanted. This is the ultimate experience one wants to capture when traveling. I really got the feeling that this is how they had been conducting business for centuries. Very little seemed to have changed over time.





Religious celebration

After our visit to the ruins of Merv, we then made a stop to the mosque to look at some more temples and sites. It turned out we had arrived on one of their holy days of celebration and were invited to join them for this feast where all food and drinks (soft drinks) were shared with all who joined.

We sat down with probably over a hundred Turkmen and joined in the celebrations. We got to taste various local dishes, fruit and vegetables.

We were again the center of attention not the opposite. So, bringing out the camera and taking pictures proved not to be any problem at all, on the contrary they were all very keen to pose for a picture.

To elderly women dressed up in their finest costumes wanted me to take a picture of them posing together in the midst of a field of flowers (see picture above left). The younger women were very beautiful in deed. After having participated in the feast we visited a smaller open-air market where lots of locally made jewelry were sold. Again, this posed for good photo opportunity with the young women going through what was on sale.

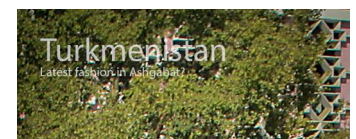




Ashgabat (I)

From Mary (Merv) we fly to the capital, Ashgabat. We check in to **Hotel Ak Altyn** which is a modern and OK tourist hotel in the city. We spend two days sight-seeing the capital with its bizzarr and costly architecture. The luxurious apartment buildings (picture above) were erected in a record time. They seem, however still to be mostly empty since having been finished a few years back. **Niyazov, the former president, wrote books of which Rukhnama** is the most famous (picture bottom center). All governmental employees had to take an exam on the book before being hired. It is said it has been translated into all the world's major languages, including Swedish.

We visit also the neutrality Arc where they also have a permanent guard parading the place. It is unbelievable poor judgement to lavishly spend the country's gas-money on these type of projects, while the population suffers and many of them starve. We see many young women dressed in colorful uniforms. These are schoolgirls. The red signals high-school and the green elementary school. Here people are more cautious about us taking photos.





Turkmenistan
Posing with local officer in Ashgabat



Turkmenistan
...Colors of the nation



Turkmenistan

A few of many statues in Ashgabat

© michaelcederborg



ALP ARSLAN TURKEMEN
1062 - 1072

MALIK SA TURKEMEN
1172 - 1192

Ashgabat (II)

The weather is very pleasant, like a Swedish summer, and in the evenings, we have dinner outside at a grill-restaurant where also beer is being served. We continue to explore Ashgabat. We also make a stop at the carpet museum where we are told the world's largest carpet is on display. We also visit a gigantic mosque, which Nijazov had built in his home-village just outside of Ashgabat

Here is also a Cupola on the top made of gold and marble. It is in one piece and is said to weigh over 1.5 tones. We make a stop at **the old village of Nisa, listed as a UNESCO world heritage site**, which flourished between 200 BC to 200 AD. This fortification is from the Parthian cultural period. Old Nisa is 14 hectares and is surrounded by a high wall with more than 40 watch-towers.

Traveling on the streets of Ashgabat you see mostly flashy new cars. The houses are lite up and stand out against the night. Street lights and neon-signs everywhere makes this place look very bizzarr and artificial. The ministerial buildings are enormous and can impossibly not fill up then necessary administrative staff needed. Again, such enormous misusage of funds, which could/should be allocated to schooling for the children, medical care for the people and building up of social welfare system so much needed where people are starving.

Turkmenistan

Young women in school uniform



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Turkmenistan

Housing Project - for selected citizens - Ashgabat

© michaelcederborg

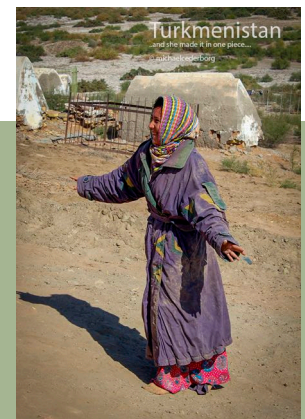


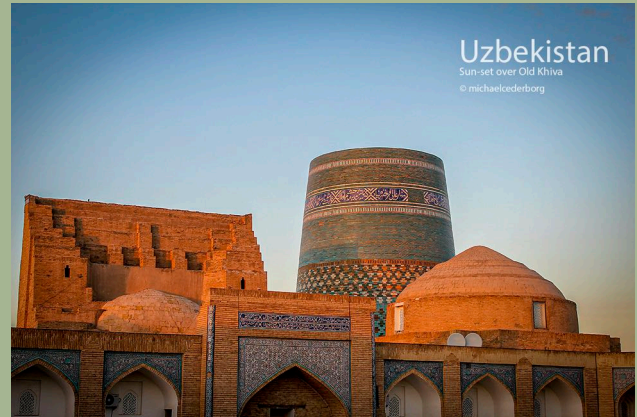
Kunya-Urgench

We fly from Ashgabat to Dashoguz which is very close to the Uzbekish border. From here we continue by car north-east towards Kunya-Urgench which was the capital back in the 12th century. This site is also listed since 2005 on UNESCO world heritage list.

Apart from many old ruins including the highest standing tower in all of Central Asia with big event was visiting Kirk Mulla. This is a small but holy hill to which women in all times have been pilgriming from near and far away. It is said that rolling down the hill will increase fertility of young women. This has been a practice conducted over the centuries. We were very fortunate to come at a time when a family with a young daughter were about to perform this rite.

She put on a thick old coat in order to cover her up as much as possible from bruises and dirt. We saw two young women rolling down the hill, one of them was bleeding from her mouth after the performance. We sincerely hope this did increase her chances of becoming pregnant. How knows 😊





Khiva

We cross the border again, this time at a different point and travel back in to Uzbekistan and **the ancient city of Khiva**. We check in to **Hotel Malika Khiva** in the center of the old and closed city. The city is mostly known for its cruel ruler back in the days when the Silk road was in use. A lot of the slave trade was handled here.

Khiva is referred to as a living museum and the old city is intact. Even the surrounding wall, contracted of adobe (clay mixed with straw). Khiva is famous for its lovely turquoise mosaic. The city had its peak towards the end of the 16th century and the following century. Khiva is a UNESCO heritage site just like Bukhara and Samarkand.

Waking around this old enclosed city with all or most of its buildings intact feels like being moved back in time. It was as early as the 17th century Khiva began to develop as a slave market. During the first half of the 19th century, around one million Persians and an unknown number of Russians, were enslaved there before being sold off. A large part of them were involved in the construction of building the enormous wall surrounding the city - Ichan-Kala.

Comparing the three sites of Bukhara, Samarkand and Khiva is of course not possible, but maybe I thought Khiva coming up on top of these three.

