



THE RAG

ARMY & NAVY CLUB

THE SILK ROAD:

RAG ADVENTURE CIRCLE 18-28 OCT 25 JOURNEY TO UZBEKISTAN

The RAG Adventure Circle named this tour "*In the Footsteps of Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly.*" I joined the tour at short notice, from a position of complete ignorance regarding the history, economics and culture of central Asia. Colonel Charles Stoddart and Captain Arthur Conolly were British officers who met a tragic end at the behest of Emir Nasrullah of Bukhara in June 1842. Stoddart was first arrested by Emir Nasrullah Khan in 1838, having been dispatched on a mission to persuade the Emir to free Russian slaves and sign a treaty of friendship with Britain. In November 1841, Captain Arthur Conolly arrived in Bukhara, with part of his remit being to secure Stoddart's release. Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful; both men were executed on charges of spying for the British Empire on 24 June 1842. Fortunately our experiences in Uzbekistan were rather different.



Ten RAG members joined the tour in **Tashkent**, met not by hostility, but by our superb guide Elyorbek Khatamov who accompanied us throughout the tour. The fast paced tour of a central part of the Silk Road took in **Tashkent**, the desert castles of Ayaz Kala and Toprak Kala, the walled city of **Khiva** and on to **Bukhara** and **Samarkand** with a short rural homestay in the **Nurafshan mountains**. We travelled not by caravans of bactrian camels, rather by an Uzbekistan airlines internal flight to Ulgrich then minibus and, finally, rail from Samarkand back to Tashkent. We were bowled over by the mosques, madrassas, mausoleums and minarets (plus sojourns of shopping in the markets). The restoration of these ancient buildings can only really be appreciated by visiting.

The ancient history of these lands to the modern age of a thriving independent nation was brought to life by Elyor. From before the arrival of Islam in central Asia, in the eighth century, to the dark days of the Mongol hordes and Genghis Khan onwards to the leadership and renewal under Timerlane. We learnt about the Russian Empire and the Great Game, Soviet Union days and then finally, after the fall of the USSR, the emergence of Uzbekistan as an independent nation in 1991. In the last few years, Uzbekistan has emerged as an outward looking nation very keen to attract, and welcoming for, visitors from around the world.

Tashkent is the modern capital of Uzbekistan, the city was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1966 and the rebuild during the Soviet era was in that style. From Chorsu bazaar, an intoxicating mix of dried fruits, spices, sweet treats and nuts (we avoided the meat part) to a massive plov restaurant to the Hazrati Imam complex in the old city, which survived the earthquake. We had a whirlwind tour on our first day.



After flying to Urgench in the west of the country the following day, we journeyed north to visit the ancient desert castles. Thence to the walled ancient city of **Khiva** where our hotel was in an ancient madrassa in the centre of the old town. Khiva is an extraordinary city renowned with its perfectly preserved medieval core, the Itchan Kala. The old town is a UNESCO World Heritage site, enclosed by towering mud-brick walls. It was a vital trading post and the capital of the Khiva Khanate on the Silk Road. Entering the Itchan Kala feels like stepping back in time, surrounded by a dense concentration of stunning Islamic architecture, including madrasahs and the famously unfinished Kalta Minor minaret, and the intricate, blue-tiled Khodja Minaret. It captivated us with its labyrinthine streets, giving us an unforgettable glimpse into Central Asian history.

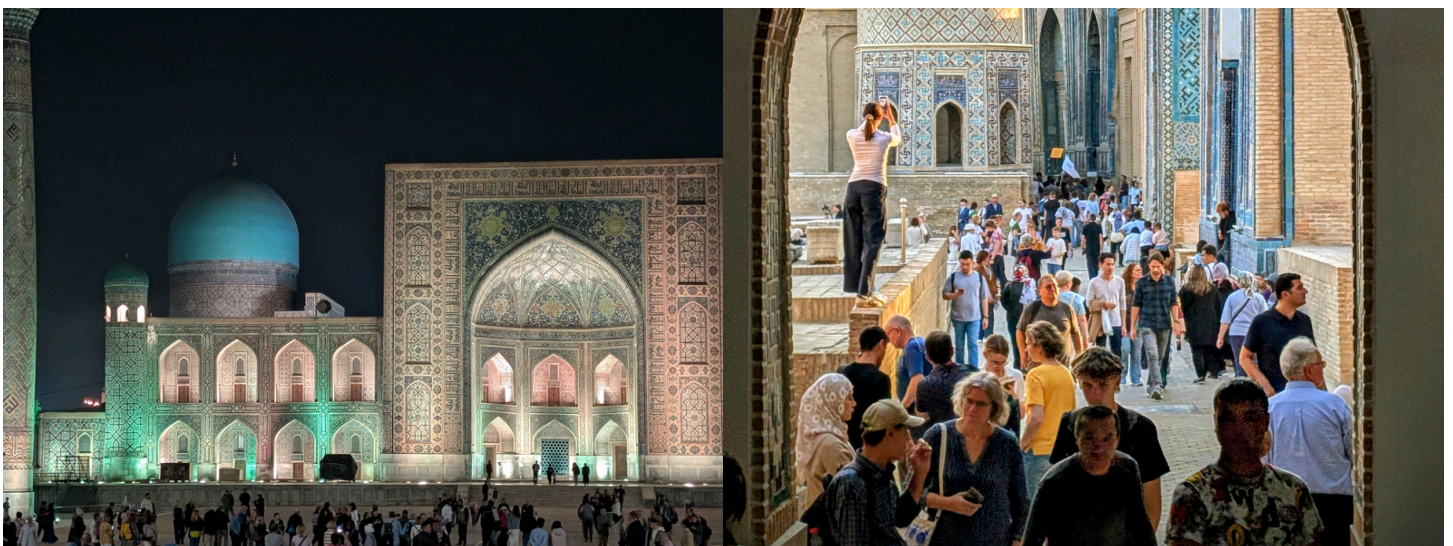


Our next Silk Road city was **Bukhara**, where Colonel Stoddart and Captain Conolly were imprisoned by the Emir, and later publicly beheaded, in June 1842 in the square in front of the Ark Fortress. The city's silhouette is defined by the magnificent Po-i-Kalyan Complex, which includes the iconic Kalyan Minaret (known for surviving Genghis Khan's invasion) and the massive Kalyan Mosque. The Ark Fortress and the charming Lyab-i-Hauz area, where life continues to revolve around the central pool and surrounding historic structures.

We learnt about Bukhara's historic water system at the museum of water. It relied on water drawn from the Amu Darya river via canals. These flowed into public and private reservoirs. Until the early 20th century, hundreds of these pools served as the main water source. However, because they were major sources of disease, the Soviet government ordered most of them to be drained and filled in, a public health measure that drastically altered Bukhara's landscape. The beautiful Lyab-i-Hauz pool remains.



Samarkand was perhaps the jewel in the crown of our tour from the establishment of Islam in the region during the eighth century becoming a major centre of Muslim learning with great leaders in medicine, astronomy and mathematics during the Samanid dynasty of the ninth and tenth centuries to the destruction under the Mongol armies of Genghis Khan. In the fourteenth century Samarkand revived and entered its Golden Age, under the leader Timur lane, who made it the capital of his vast empire. He brought artisans and scholars from across his lands to construct magnificent architectural masterpieces, often decorated with characteristic blue tiles. Key monuments built during this era include the Gur-e Amir mausoleum (Timur's tomb) and the Bibi-Khanym Mosque. Timur's grandson, Ulugh Beg, ruled in the 15th century and transformed Samarkand into a scientific and intellectual centre. He is famous for building the Ulugh Beg Madrasah in Registan Square and his Observatory. After becoming part of the Soviet Union, it briefly served as the capital of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic .



Now is the time to visit, there has been a huge programme of restoration and it is an easy, welcoming and safe country to travel in, yet is not yet over touristed. We were privileged to be welcomed in such a fascinating part of central Asia.

Sarah Galbraith

6 Nov 25



Three wise men in Samarkand