port functions with an air of supreme authority, capricious self-governance and ill-acknowledged chaos. Of the green-uniformed immigration police and officials, probably not more than four speak English. The woman examining my invitation had seemed deeply suspicious of its alien scribbling. As if I had invented it. Ever-barking passport controllers, I deeply suspect now, do little more than match photos to faces. Money-changers drop shutters at night and flimsy internet kiosks become sleeping chambers. The lounge serves as a shelter for an oriental cleaning-force and a horde of feisty, drunken cabbies.

The nervous, heavyset woman who changed my US$100 had dumped several, fat bundles of cyms and hobbled away into the dark - leaving me mystified, suspicious and alarmed. But it wasn't a tourist-scam after all. I had been deposited at the Hotel Dedeman - a block away from Unicef, housed in a Victorian mansion, sitting over a reinforced bunker. Days of finalising brand and media strategies passed quickly. Like an alien, I ate 4-star and breathed conditioned air inside identical white SUVs for a week. Till Navruz arrived.


Bullah House

Navruz is the first day of Spring and New Year in the Iranian calendar. Celebrated in ancient Babylon, it signifies the transition from hunting to husbandry. The Avesta indicates Persian King Jamshid popularised Navruz and accepted tributes at the Persepolis from all empires. Millennia later, Navruz was still being celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm in Tashkent. Thousands thronged the vast, picturesque parliament complex frolicking around fountains, photographing post-independence sculptures and cheering ministerial convoys. Elderly visitors to the WW-II shrine thumbed through ornate brass-plated pages of codices, scanning alphabetical lists for friends lost in combat. Oriental families had come too, perhaps to honour this city that had welcomed all during that Great War.

At the central park a band played hissing pop tunes to the cheer of sprightly young people who dressed in hip clothes and smoked hi-tech Kent cigarettes. Families dressed in traditional costumes, I learnt, were from Samarqand or Khiva or Ferghana. You could tell from their attire. And also from their hesitation, difficulty in blending in and timid steps in this dashing metropolis, I thought later. I tried to blend in with the masses. Only, every 10-15 minutes, someone came up to ask if I was 'namaste', i.e., Indian. Alas! Even this alien land of foreign tongues had been invaded by the pervasive stealth-weapon of Hindi soaps.

Frozen in the middle of a resounding gallop, a giant brass stallion gleamed beneath a cutlass-wielding Amir Temur in the central park. A Mongol warrior, Temur stands in the centre of not only Tashkent, but also the Uzbek national identity. With this titanic sculpture started a riot of museums, shrines, mosques and statues bold, distinct and masterful. At the central plaza thousands flocked to admire traditional paintings on display, chat up aspiring artistes and shop for collectibles ranging from ancient manuscripts to KGB spy-cameras.

People in Tashkent speak Russian with the dashing flamboyance of hereditary urbanites. But their faces, beautiful as they are, can't always be matched to the language. Racial origins range from Russian, Tatar, Tajik, Kazakh, Chinese, Korean, Japanese to Macedonian, descended from settlers who had arrived with Alexander. With a communist discipline in its stride, Tashkent is an insomniac metropolis. A day's hard work is often avenged by a night of free-flowing Vodka, frenzied discos, unbridled Bardh songs and sometimes, the pure rush of drunken driving. Benzene-driven Volgas, mean, sturdy and throbbing with raw, soviet-style power, leave trails of black plumes. Increasingly mellow, lush neighborhoods ripple outwards from the city centre towards a quiet suburb where children's chirping, lovers' hushed promises and bicycle-bells slowly drown out the drone of high-speed traffic.

On suburban verandahs retired old men, basking like crocodiles, wait out their drunken stupor. Grass grows slowly inside carcasses of sturdy Russian automobiles, ditched for more efficient Japanese breeds. Children hide inside their corroded skeletons and declare war against neighbours. Some 80's rock song wafts from a rebel teenager's stereo. Kite-wars erupt on rooftops just