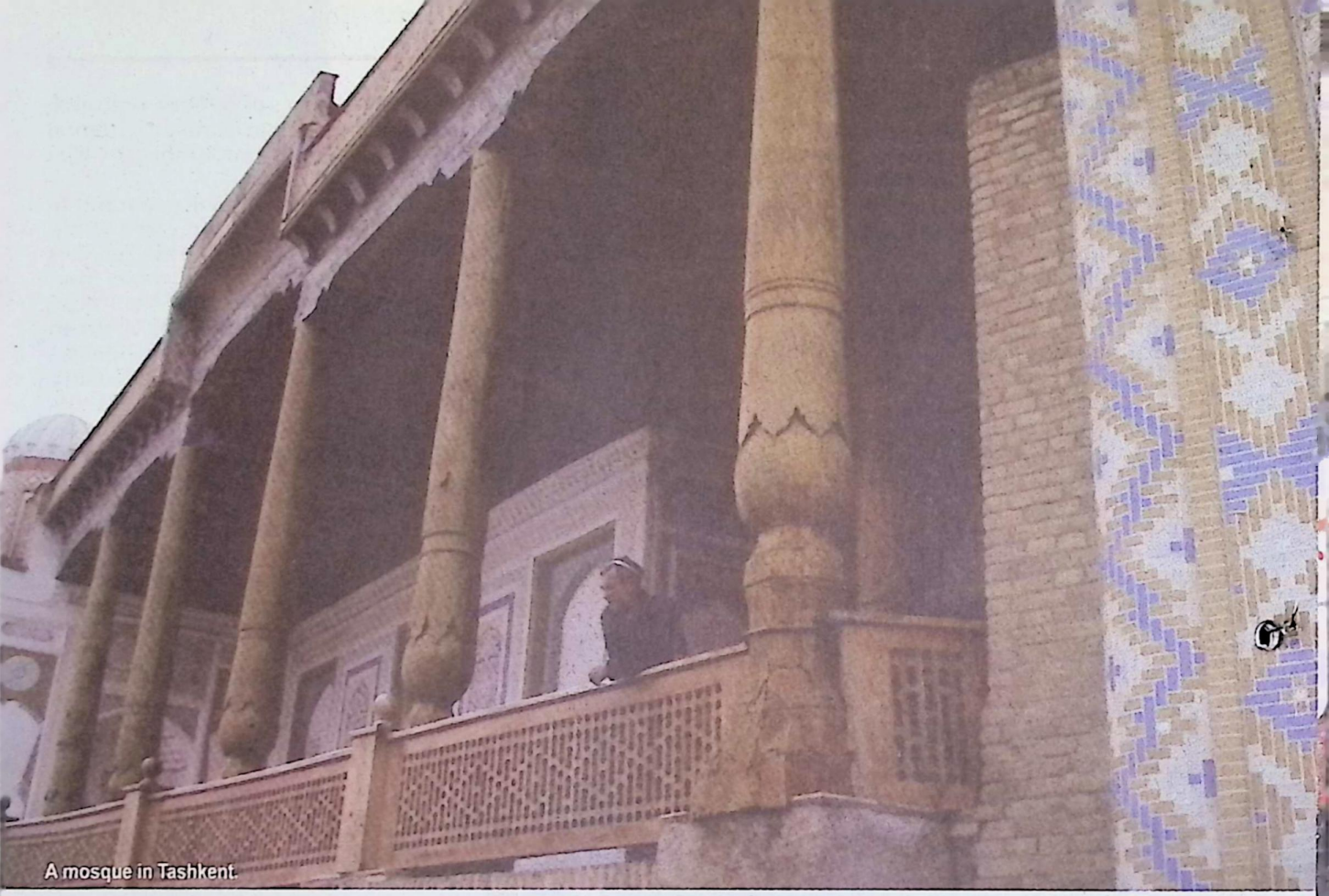


A mosque in Tashkent

as neighborhood girls stroll out with their Walkmans. In backyard orchards, fair maidens gather to brew the traditional Sumailak in huge cauldrons with iron ladles.

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The high-speed train 'Registon' reaches Samarqand in about three hours. It meanders over the silk-road trail - packed with, perhaps, the same fragile anticipation felt by ancient merchants. Outside hundreds of miles of evergreen plains, dotted by adobe clusters and cattle herds, get mired in the past. Then the first sight of rockpiles that quickly grow into a snow-swept range. Across the plain, boldly facing the ancient, relentless Turkemen range, rises a huddle of hills, cloaked in soft green moss and bursting with young life. It was suddenly very easy to see why the great Silk Road, unfurling beneath the strict vigil of majestic icy peaks and led on by goading whispers of the mossy hills, had chosen to cut a swath between the two.

Deep inside the alpine district, quietly crouched Samarqand. Radiant. For over 3000 years it has remained a centre of culture, art, commerce and learning. Here, papermaking was perfected and passed on to Europe. As we arrived, the eastbound Gagarin Street led into the city, where ancient mosques and shrines raised their peacock-blue heads beyond the muddy cityscape. Our hotel of choice was a partly-converted residence inviting, homely and tender. Beyond its high gates, this lodging of woodwork ran around a lush cherry orchard. The 10-year-old son checked us in, the father took our bags and the two daughters led us inside. The rooms were heated by water, paneled by planks and covered in Iranian carpets. Painstakingly embroidered with silver, gold and crimson black 'Suzanne's hung resplendent from walls. New brides customarily embroider these wall-mats to demonstrate their sense of tradition, refined taste and most importantly, coming-of-age. Before long, this family's new bride came out to serve green tea with honey-laced walnuts, cashews, prunes and sugar cubes. The mother offered terse, hushed instructions as the men watched proudly. At dinner, grandmother offered pre-dinner Munazat and broke bread with us. We feasted on their hospitality, watched Turkish channels on their television and claimed their garden-chairs.

Barely 20 feet from our hotel the tomb of Temur, the Gour-E-Amir rises 1000 feet into the air a massive stone structure with intricate brickwork and brilliant patterns. The nearby bozori selling everything from apricots to air-conditioners is a social club of sorts. Antique-peddlers gossip in the shades of minarets and bakers slap on dough inside earthen ovens. Mother-daughter teams